

Low African Representation at the Posidonia International Shipping Expo 2024

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Introduction

The global shipping industry is arguably one of the most important industries there is. With over 80 per cent of the world's trade conducted via the oceans, shipping constitutes one of the main threads connecting people and economies around the world. With such heavy stakes, it is no wonder an event such as the Posidonia International Shipping Exhibition would attract momentous attention and interest.

From 3 to 7 June 2024, tens of thousands of stakeholders in the maritime sector, particularly the shipping industry, descended on Athens for the annual Posidonia International Shipping Expo. In attendance were various private sector actors, official delegations from their respective embassies, researchers, academics and journalists. With thousands of attendees, participants, and exhibitors to match, there were surprisingly few African stakeholders taking part in the exhibition and seminars convened at the conference. This piece endeavours to understand why African representation and participation was lacking at the week-long event. One of the Ocean Regions Programme Researchers attended the event, and herein are the key takeaways.

What is Posidonia?

In Greek mythology, Posidonia is the “grass of Poseidon” the ancient god of the sea. Posidonia is also known as “seagrass”, a [genus](#) of flower plants found in the Mediterranean Sea and the southern coast of Australia. Much like its [namesake](#), inspired by Poseidon, the forum known as

Posidonia is well renowned. This year's Posidonia Expo is said to have been the [largest](#) since its inception some sixty years ago. During the opening [ceremony](#), Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis emphasised his support for Greek shipowners "in every aspect of the shipping industry, from the green transition to the safety of ports and shipyards". The event featured not only seminars and conferences, but also hosted a record-breaking 2,037 exhibitors, with major companies such as DHL, Air France, and Bosch showcasing their products, services and expertise. The exhibiting companies ranged from logistics companies and shipbuilders to ship registers and marine consultancies. The event brought together professionals in the industry to exchange insights, foster networks, and consolidate business partnerships.

This year's conference occurred at a somewhat opportune time, given the instability in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The continued turmoil along these key shipping routes has caused major shipping giants including but not limited to Maersk and the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) to divert their operations around the longer Cape Sea route (see **image below**).



The impact of instability in the Red Sea on commercial shipping was noted several times in the seminars at the conference and casually amongst attendees in the exhibition hall. One would

¹ The graphic above depicts the [prolonged](#) diversion for ships avoiding the Red Sea and compares the distance in nautical miles of the Red Sea (via the Suez Canal) route vis-à-vis the Cape Sea route. The latter route, around the Cape of Good Hope adds approximately 4,000 miles for ships travelling from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific.

hope that these discussions included the risks posed by the Red Sea crisis not only to international shipping but also to African stakeholders in the sector. Interestingly, there were few African exhibitors present at the conference.

Africa at Posidonia

The conference saw participation and attendance from people of various nationalities. Of the 83 countries and territories [represented](#) at Posidonia 2024, only eight were African, viz. Egypt, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Morocco, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. The table below outlines the African countries that were in attendance, participating in the exhibit and showcasing the services they provide.

COUNTRY	COMPANY	OWNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP	PRODUCTS AND SERVICES
EGYPT	Alexandria Shipyard	Egyptian Ministry of Defence and Military Production, Marine Industries and Services Organisation	Shipbuilding, repair yards
	Antipollution Egypt	Joint stock company in partnership between Suez Canal Authority, represented by each of the Canal Rope Company, the Suez Shipyard Company and Egyptian Greek Businessman Eric Adam	Environmental protection, waste treatment
	Bilymaris – Billy Mitchel Marine Services	Not clear	Logistics, shipchandlers, ship spare parts, ship suppliers
	Dolphin Marine Group – Dolphin Middle East Marine LLC	Not clear	Chemicals, deck equipment, firefighting equipment, hydraulics, inspection services, pleasure craft, safety equipment, services
	El Dawi Sons Shipping Agency	Established in 1975, currently under the management of Mr Mohamed Ahmed El Dawi and his son Moamen Mohamed El Dawi	Anchors, chains, bearings, bunkers, cables, canal authorities, cargo handling, compressor suppliers, consultancy services, courier services, crewing services, deck equipment, firefighting equipment, hydraulics, inspection services, in and under-water repairs, launch services, logistics, marine fenders and hoses, publications, ship agents, shipchandlers, spare parts, waster disposal
	Elephant Marine Services Co	Not clear	Port agencies, ship agents ship spare parts, ship suppliers
	GBS Shipping	Not clear	Crewing services, logistics, ship agents, ship suppliers

	Golden Ocean Marine Services	Not clear	Ship suppliers, repair works, logistics services
	Lucky Dolphin Marine Services	Not clear	Repair services, ship agents, ship suppliers
GUINEA-BISSAU	International Ships Registry of Guinea-Bissau (G-B International)	Private corporation registered under Greek laws, duly appointed and exclusively delegated by the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, Ministry of Transports and Communications	Vessel registration
LIBERIA	Practomar Inc	Member of the Eugenides Group	Maritime services, port agencies, ship agents
MOROCCO	Lasry Maroc	Not clear	Logistics, maritime services, port agencies, ship agents, shipchandlers, ship suppliers
SENEGAL	Dakarnave (Chantier Naval Dakar Groupe Lisnave Internacional)	Affiliated company of Lisnave International, SA, itself a member of the Portuguese group Lisnave – Estaleiros Navais	Repair services, shipbuilding, repair yards
NAMIBIA	Namdock – Namibia Drydock and Ship Repair (Pty) Ltd – Walvis Bay	Strategic partnership between the Namibian Government and the private sector	Shipbuilding, repair yards
SIERRA LEONE	Sierra Leone Maritime Administration	The Administration is guided by an Advisory Board, and headed by an Executive Director, appointed by the President and Head of State	Government organisations, institutions, vessel registration
SOUTH AFRICA	Dormac Marine and Offshore Engineering	Division of Southey Holdings	Repair services, shipbuilding, repair yards
	National Ship Chandlers South Africa	Privately owned	Logistics, shipchandlers, ship spare parts, ship suppliers
	Oceanic Seagull Maritime	Established by Harry Panas. And Gerry Koungianos	Logistics, maritime services, port agencies, services providers, ship agents, shipchandlers, ship suppliers

What was apparent to Ms Ramachela, the Ocean Regions Programme researcher and representative at the event, was that few African stakeholders were present when compared to the swathes of Asian and Euro-Atlantic (Western) entities. The question is why this is so, considering how much of the international shipping industry revolves around Africa's maritime

domain, quite literally in terms of navigation around the continent and [investments](#) in Africa's booming [maritime](#) sector.²

Take for instance the notion of vessel registration, a service provided by a number of entities globally. In accordance with international law, merchant vessels are required to register in a host country. This registration provides vessels the right to fly a civil ensign, namely the flag of the country it is registered under. These are the so-called flags of convenience,³ where a ship is registered in a different country than that where the ship's owner resides or is a citizen. The International Maritime Organisation ([IMO](#)) defines vessel registration as the "general mechanism for establishing a ship's nationality and for regulating shipping" under a particular State. Under international law, the ship registration system gives a State the responsibility to conduct periodic inspections of the vessel, but also the right to protect any vessel flying its flag.

There were several companies present at the Posidonia [Expo](#), that provide this service, such as the Bahamas Maritime Authority, the Barbados Maritime Ship Registry, the Cayman Registry, the International Merchant Marine Registry of Belize, the Marshall Islands Registry, the Palau International Ship Registry and St. Kitts and Nevis International Ship Registry, to name a few. Among these, there are some notable registries relevant to the topic of this paper, specifically those attached to African countries and their flags. The International Ships Registry of Guinea-Bissau for example, albeit authorised by the government of the West African nation, is registered under Greek Laws. A pertinent question to ask is what kinds of benefits African countries reap from having various vessels flying their flags. When these vessels are involved in scandal, for example, an African-flagged vessel engaged in illegal fishing or caught fishing in a marine protected area (MPA), it adversely affects the image of the country whose flag the vessel is flying and might engender diplomatic rows. There is indeed plenty of negative press to go around, for the company registries included, however often these companies are somewhat invisible, offstage (behind the curtain) actors, whilst the flagged countries are centre stage in the spotlight. With

² Presently, Africa's blue [economy](#) sectors generate approximately 296 billion US Dollars. This is projected to reach 405 billion US Dollars by 2030, and 576 billion US Dollars by 2063. Today, Africa's blue economy [sectors](#) generate roughly 49 million jobs.

³ Flags of convenience (FoCs), however, are not so convenient, particularly for labourers working onboard such vessels. [FoCs](#) create a level of unaccountability and a lack of transparency where workers onboard FoC vessels may be subjected to poor working and living conditions, low wages, inadequate food and clean drinking water, as well as abuse. This of course depends on the Flag State, some FoC registers are better than others.

such high stakes for African countries, why then was the inclusion and participation of African countries slim?

Another point related to the lack of African exhibits is the absence of seminars presented by African academics, researchers and official delegations. In addition to the seminars presented by private sector actors, from think tanks and institutions of higher learning, were those hosted by [official](#) delegations:

- The Embassy of Poland in cooperation with the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology and the Ministry of Infrastructure presented a seminar;
- The Royal Norwegian Embassy and the Norwegian Maritime Authority hosted a 'Quality Flag Breakfast';
- The Embassy of the Republic of Korea presented a seminar on the '4th Korean-Hellenic Maritime Cooperation Forum';
- The United States Embassy in cooperation with the Hellenic Chamber of Commerce hosted a seminar; and
- The Italian Trade Agency in the Athens Office of Trade Promotion of the Italian Embassy also presented a seminar.

It is conceivable that in many of the seminars, such as the one on '*Safe and efficient marine transport of liquid hydrogen*' or the one on '*Blue Economy – The key towards Mediterranean Regional Sustainability*', Africa and its vast maritime domain were a topic of discussion. One cannot help but wonder whether it would have been somewhat more valuable to hear insights directly from African stakeholders in the industry of maritime and shipping issues affecting the continent. However, the question around the low African presence remains.

Explaining the lack of African representation

One cannot but wonder whether the oversight of African representation lies with the event organisers and sponsors, or with African stakeholders. Was representation of African maritime companies limited because these entities were not considered large or prestigious enough to be showcased and included in the event? Or was there simply no interest on the part of African

maritime companies and shipping entities? The latter question seems inconceivable because arguably any entity, company or individual stakeholder looking to showcase their services or simply learn more about the industry would be misplaced to miss such an event. Thus, the question now shifts to the issue of financial costs. Whilst attendance at Posidonia was free of charge, would-be exhibitors are subject to different procedures.

According to the Posidonia Exhibition [Rules](#) and Regulations, exhibitors are required to pay a fee in order to showcase their products and services. There were several exhibition halls and seminar rooms at Posidonia this year, with different rental fees for exhibitors and non-exhibitors. To rent a slot in the Posidonia Conference Hall, exhibitors were charged 1000 Euros for 2 hours or 4000 Euros for the full day, with a 24 per cent VAT. For non-exhibitors, the rate was 1,700 Euros for 2 hours or 6000 Euros for the full day. The various seminar rooms also had different rates, for example in one of the rooms exhibitors paid a rental fee of 1000 Euros for 2 hours or 2,500 Euros for the full day, whilst non-exhibitors paid 1,700 Euros for 2 hours or 5,500 Euros for the full day; hiring equipment cost extra.

This year, the payment for exhibitions consisted of two instalments. For those exhibitors who could not pay the full amount of the rented space by the start of the Exhibition, their access to the premises would be denied and the would-be exhibitor would forfeit any amounts already paid. Moreover, any loss or damage to exhibits is at the risk of the exhibitor, and therefore the exhibitors must thus acquire adequate insurance. The rules further state that the organisers are under no liability to the exhibitor or any other person in respect of any actions, proceedings, claims, demands, losses, costs or expenses whatsoever which may be brought against or suffered or incurred by the exhibitors.

In addition to the costs outlined above, exhibiting companies are responsible for funding the travel costs of their employees and representatives, this includes the cost of visas. In and of itself, the process of applying for visas is not only expensive but can also be quite tedious, particularly when visas are required for multiple people travelling for the purpose of work. The financial feasibility may be somewhat slim for smaller African start-ups just beginning to make their mark in the shipping industry.

Over and above, cumulatively, the costs of attending international conferences can be very high. Velin et al. (2021) confirm as much, noting that stakeholders from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) may be under-represented at international conferences. The authors use the term “conference equity”, to demonstrate how individuals from LMICs are disadvantaged and “restricted by systematic barriers, namely high travel costs, visa restrictions and lower acceptance rates for research presentations”. As a result of these high costs, a large percentage of African maritime stakeholders may not have the ability to foot the bill for an entire delegation.

Some Suggestions: Africa needs greater representation at International Maritime and Shipping Events

The interconnectedness of the global shipping industry and the cross-cutting nature of maritime security issues makes it difficult if not impossible to discuss aspects related to these without considering Africa’s challenges both on land and at sea and without African representation and participation. A key question to ask would be whether Africa is being left behind in the global shipping industry, and if so, what can be done to remedy this disadvantage.

Perhaps what is needed is for African stakeholders to amplify and recentre the continent’s maritime concerns. There are already some noteworthy maritime-related conferences in Africa such as the Africa Maritime Cabotage and Blue Economy Conference (AMCBEC), the Association of African Maritime Administrations (AAMA) Conference, and the International Bunker Industry Association (IBIA) Africa Bunker and Shipping Conference. By and large, however, these conferences still occur in relative isolation and it seems that there is minimal cross-conference knowledge sharing and post-event exchanges of experiences between Africa and the rest of the world. Another recourse for the limited African involvement would be for think tanks, academics and the maritime business community on the continent to build closer ties to promote interaction and even joint participation in events such as the Posidonia Shipping Expo.

Conclusion

African actors must assert themselves more strongly on the global stage and demonstrate not only higher levels of agency but also joint efforts in advocating for African maritime priorities, challenges and opportunities. A cause for concern, in need of further investigation, is the limited if not altogether absent media reports and publications from African think tanks and news outlets

regarding the outcome of the conference. Moreover, beyond the need to bring African voices to the fore of maritime security and shipping discourse, there is a need to enhance the participation of women. The [majority](#) of the participants and attendees at Posidonia 2024 were men. Clearly, the field of maritime security and in particular shipping remains a male-dominated arena. There is a need for greater participation from women as well as the youth demographic.

There is no doubt that events such as Posidonia bring together a range of actors such as private sector champions, government stakeholders, policy experts, researchers and academics. However, merely bringing together these elements is not sufficient, what's needed is robust discussions to inspire research, inform policy and effect positive change in the industry. For instance, it is good and well to discuss and problematise the impacts of shipping and its carbon emissions on the marine environment, and climate change in general, but to what extent do these discussions feed back into practice? Having such discussions in the absence of practical solutions or any sort of commitment to attempt to remedy the issues at hand, is somewhat fruitless. It would be interesting and useful to perhaps conduct a study based on interviews with the participants to assess the value that they attach to Posidonia and gauge the outcomes in terms of pressing issues related to the industry. Based on these findings a strategy could be developed to encourage broader African representation and participation in such events.

This Op-ed was compiled by Tshegofatso Ramachela within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

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