

## Short Commentary

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# A look into “Outlining the challenges of Covid-19 health crises in Africa’s maritime industry: The case of maritime operations in marine warranty surveying practice”: Discussing ‘three pillar challenge’

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### Abstract

While the relevance of carrying out Marine Warranty Surveys (MWS) as a mandatory insurable practice towards mitigating associated operational risks within the offshore oil and gas industry in Africa through the 2020 Covid-19 crises, examined against the potential health risk and risks associated with various Covid-19 restrictions; remain central to understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the work and live of marine warranty surveyors, who form part of pool of marine professionals risking their lives daily to ensure continuous supply of essential commodity like energy and food that reaches every part of the Globe.

As Sackey et al, [1] examined in issue 20 of springer maritime studies, to better appreciate the challenges of Covid-19 to the live and work of these selfless individuals, essentially identified the various risk interface along the ‘flight path’ of the MWS’s working practice in relation to marine professional and seafarers overall, for which we examine the ‘three pillar challenge’.

**Keywords:** health and safety of marine professionals; Covid-19 challenges; offshore operations amidst COVID; Africa’s marine and offshore industry and COVID.

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## Background

While the logistical requirement for MWS may vary depending on the nature of operation, the extent and the MWS Company involved, similar patterns of risk underpin them all. In other words, since it is expected that the appointed MWS is present on the site for the marine operations, his or her life is affected by the hazards at play on the logistics movement, the routine and non-routine (specialized) vessel operations to be witnessed - thus, assuring of asset and operational integrity on behalf of the insurer and insurance companies.

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which can be characterized to reflect the first six-month of the spread of the global pandemic, its impact observed on the health and work of marine professionals and seafarers were drastic, thus according [2] reporting for the World Economic Forum. These assertions were subsequently buttressed by [3], and the World Economic Forum (WEF 2020), who further enumerated the challenge in three distinct folds (in other words the ‘*three pillar challenge*’), namely;

- (i) ensuring health and safety protection for vessel and crew,
- (ii) ensuring vessel crew are not marooned [2]-to prevent mental un-wellness, while
- (iii) Preventing the global supply system from grinding to a halt [1][2]. These, I discussed with a bit of details in proceeding paragraphs - focusing on the offshore oil and gas industry assisting with meeting the energy needs amidst the pandemic.

## Ensuring health and safety protection for vessel and crew in operation

The health and safety of vessel and crew can be described as the backbone for shipboard operations whether in port locations, at sea or within offshore locations. Unlike ordinary marine shipboard operations that take place on ordinary cargo carriers such as container vessels, general, bulk carriers, RORO vessels and so forth, offshore shipboard operations are characterized by specialized operations that are unique to the specific features per the design of vessel, purpose of machineries installed and nature of operation being undertaking.

While crewing on these specialized offshore vessels are easily categorized into vessel crew and passenger crew as per Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention to allow for proper coordination of emergency rescues and evacuations due to the large crew sizes that far exceeds the minimal manning requirement, this in no way compares to the ordinary operations of passenger cruise vessels, where passenger do not necessarily have prior marine safety skill or training. It is therefore, easy to assume that any potential health and safety risk onboard cruise vessels will be higher especially where passenger crew size exceeds 500s - confined to spaces easily equated to two or three football fields. Such an environment health-wise, as observed is with high transmissibility rate for potential viruses like covid-19. This is exemplified aboard cruise ship *Diamond Princess*, where reports of some 700 passenger being infected within a short space of time. By design, the larger part of most cruise vessels are enclosed tanks even above deck by nature and therefore,

tend to influence air circulation and ventilation which has been a factor in the spread of COVID. The wide spread nature of infection that was observed to have occurred in the cruise industry can therefore not be mistaken as cruise vessel design and operational conditions were rife for the spread.

Within the oil and gas offshore industry, the passenger crew constitute individuals highly skilled and most often than not, have versatile career paths encompassing various marine roles and are conversant with marine health and safety training and operations –as their skillsets formed the bases of their deployment on these specialized marine vessels. Therefore, on most occasions, vessel managers refer to these crew mix as either part of the marine crew or project crew. Thus, the project crew of which the attending MWS is a part of, are mandated to remain onboard as long as the execution of an offshore project remains in place at time of service. Project crew onboard offshore construction vessels can number up to 300 or more, and therefore were also necessarily in cautionary state over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic as the case report of cruise vessels kept rising and finally led to a grind in worldwide cruise operations. These remotely operated offshore construction vessels relatively have lots of open spaces above the weather deck due to nature of operations and also recorded relatively lower infection rates compared to other offshore units such as FPSO Units and Rigs [4]. According to [5], the cruise vessel situation revealed “how easily the virus spreads, provided estimates of the disease’s severity and allowed researchers to investigate the share of infections with no symptoms.”

An understanding of ship design and construction can also lays bare the conditions that fuelled the rapid spread amongst the 700 crew who at the time of covid-19 detection, may or may not have been self-isolating in their individual cabins. While direct physical contact may prevent in the case of self-isolation in passenger cabins, air exchange through air conditioning circulating systems serving all aspect of the vessel might have been compromised though it remains unclear and needs to be investigated. Noting here that the danger of contracting covid-19 in the early stages of its spread was catastrophic for many who succumbed to the infection through hospitalization and subsequent deaths, equally catastrophic was the associated reports and rumors that thrived with it –especially forcing individuals into psychological and nervous breakdown. The conditions were prevalently observed on board marine vessels [4,6]. According to [6] seafarers are susceptible to diverse mental health disorders including depression. Thus, the fear of contracting it from fellow crew who recently signed on led to a broader call for halt in crew change even amongst vessel crew. There were also occasion of direct confrontation between some concern project crew and offshore construction vessel operations management, which management believed was fuelled by rumors as observed by [4]. These reactions by members of vessel crew out of panic, can easily be attributed to anxiety and mental stress following the uncertainty in the early days of the COVID disease.

## Ensuring vessel crew are not marooned

Despite the varying calls that sort to ensure marine and seafaring professionals are given adequate attention to aid their operations –vital to the fight against the spread and control of

the pandemic, these individuals were deprived access to health care at shore, entry into port facilities for crew change and etc., on suspicion of spreading Covid-19. These situation led to marine and seafaring professionals overstaying their contractual term as the condition of maroon was necessitated by failure to properly recognize the essential role these individuals play and to adequately support them. Health and safety-wise, the situation was demoralizing and compounded any condition of fatigue amongst long serving vessel crew. As [6] captures it, depression, anxiety remained prevalent. It is also important to note that the situation is also rife for uncontrolled temper where a great number of crew feel uncertain about their immediate future. This is why [4]'s account of agitation onboard a offshore construction vessel –resulting from rumors that suggested, a newly signed on crew with test positive covid-19 case had been allowed to embark the vessel. Given that their mental health are easily compromised by these turn of events, any denial of medical treatment on grounds of Covid-19 remains a crime of human right abuse against seafarers and marine professionals, and such recorded incidences ought to be reported and investigated appropriately by the United Nations and its quasi bodies. It is however unclear how many of such individuals requiring medical attention were turn away and suffered a fetal consequence in this regard.

### Preventing the global supply system from grinding to a halt

Preventing the global supply chain from grinding to a halt was inimical in the fight against coronavirus whether in the transport of raw material for production of PPEs, medicines and consumables or in the supply of energy, and food across the world. While we cannot easily quantify the number of lives seafarers and marine professionals have save by ensuring doctors have needed tools, medicines and consumables at their designated hospitals to sustain the lives of sick people, it is certainly clear lots more people continue to be alive over a year and half since the pandemic. This is possible because seafarers willingly –without receiving any badge of honor from any government, continue to risk their lives and families to work in harsher conditions at sea with less social interactions for the greater good. It is important to note that though ships are equipped with emergency medical facilities, they are not necessarily equipped with adequate medical staff and therefore rely on the services of external medical officers when they visit land based facilities. Again, as elaborated in earlier paragraphs, marine and seafaring professionals have had to deal with extremely difficult conditions of work in the past couple of months for which various marine incidents and accidents have occurred.

Such accidents include the widely reported Suez Canal blockage by Ever Greene's container vessel, *Ever Given* in the course of pandemic; the offshore operation incident which led to a newly produced pipeline hanging on a winch wire breaking and falling to its crash on the seafloor of a deep water oil and gas field in offshore west Africa; or the grounding incident on the coast of Mauritius leading huge oil spill that has impacted the coastal environment till this day. Though it is unclear as to how these and many more incidences may be linked to Covid-19 while every effort is been made to ensure global supply continues as it should, comparatively, little efforts have been made to booster the morale of the men at sea, and to ensure they continue to operate at high efficiency amidst the risk. There is the need for more to be done to promote sound health and safety amongst marine professionals in times of crises.

### Conclusion

In concluding, one can only note that the promotion of health and safety continue to remain the lifeline of the men and women at sea. If such harsher treatment and lack of interest shown to the health and wellbieng of these individuals Continuous, soon there will be no one willing to dedicate his life and servitude to the sea trade. Such an environment does also not encourage active participation of women in the once noble trade.

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