



SUSTAINABILITY IN SHIP AGENCY SERVICES: AN INCENTIVE FOR A GREENER MARITIME FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The maritime sector is undergoing changes due to climate change and the increasing pressure to maintain a healthy environment. International and regional policies, especially those by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the European Union, are heightening efforts towards emission reduction and decarbonization. In this regard, ship agents and brokers, who are customarily regarded as mere intermediaries concerning port activities, are increasingly becoming active facilitators of sustainability in shipping on all levels. Their roles now encompass much more than the coordinative and clerical functions associated with operational logistics to include active participation in emissions reduction, alternative fuel changeover, and the implementation of environmental regulations, making them central to the industry's ingredients towards sustainability.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The role of ship agents is, however, underestimated in the target decarbonization value chain. While there is growing recognition of sustainability in shipping, ship agents' roles seem to be missing in the discourse. It is most likely that the attention is concentrated on shipowners and operators, which leads to the neglecting of the instrumental role that agents and brokers play towards compliance with the changing environmental regulations. This gap raises a pressing question: how can ship agents and brokers not only adapt to regulatory demands but also transform sustainability into a competitive advantage?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper examines the shifting role of ship agents and brokers in advancing sustainability across the maritime sector. Its objectives are to:

- Investigate the regulatory frameworks shaping the industry's environmental agenda, with particular focus on the IMO's GHG Strategy, the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), and the Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII).
- Identify the operational areas where ship agents actively contribute to emissions reduction and enhanced efficiency.
- Outline the commercial and strategic value of embracing sustainable practices, including improved access to green financing and strengthened client relationships.

- Present case-based insights from professional experience in the Adriatic and Mediterranean regions, illustrating the agent's contribution to more sustainable shipping operations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Drawing on regulatory frameworks, market dynamics, and operational experience, this paper examines the evolving role of ship agents in advancing maritime sustainability. It questions the traditional perception of agents as purely logistical intermediaries and brings attention to their shifting role in supporting environmental compliance and performance. In addressing a gap in the current literature, the paper also offers practical insights for agents and brokers seeking to respond to decarbonization demands while enhancing their strategic relevance in the industry.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The paper is structured into five main sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 examines the regulatory and market drivers behind sustainability in ship agency services. Section 3 investigates the operational contributions of agents, focusing on port call optimisation, alternative fuels, and green certification. Section 4 analyses the business case for sustainability, exploring cost savings, enhanced client trust, and long-term resilience. Finally, Section 5 presents the conclusion, summarising key findings and proposing recommendations for the future of sustainable ship agency practices.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN SHIPAGENCY SERVICES

As the maritime industry undergoes a fundamental transformation in response to climate change and evolving environmental expectations, ship agents and brokers are progressively stepping into a central role in promoting sustainable practices. Beyond their role as logistical intermediaries, ship agents and brokers are starting to be seen as more of strategic partners than before, helping vessel operators not only adhere to environmental regulations but also pinpoint cost-effective and financially beneficial routes towards decarbonization. This section examines both the legal obligations shaping sustainable practices and the growing market demand for eco-friendly practices, establishing a clear foundation for why sustainability is now a core part of ship agency services.

REGULATORY IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN SHIP AGENCY SERVICES

The legal framework in maritime shipping is not just scaling up - it is accelerating, and for those of us working in agency roles, this has changed how we approach nearly every port call. From my experience handling vessels in North Adriatic ports, compliance is no longer just a procedural step; it is a multifaceted operation requiring strategic pre-emptive collaboration, technical understanding, and insight. The speed of implementation, especially with EU and IMO regulations, means agents need to be ahead of the curve.

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO), through its 2023 GHG Strategy, has set ambitious targets such as cutting carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 and reaching carbon-neutral emissions by 2050¹. These targets are supported by measures like the Energy Efficiency Existing Ship Index (EEXI) and the Ship Energy Efficiency Management Plan (SEEMP)². In one recent case, I worked with a bulk carrier calling Rijeka, and delays in securing SEEMP documentation threatened the vessel's adherence. As an agent, I had to foster and expedite communication between the shipowner, port state control, and the local authorities to ensure timely clearance.

These are no longer exceptions - they're becoming the standard.

On the part of Europe, the extension of the Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) to include maritime from 2024 has elevated the discussion further. During my recent call from a short-sea vessel operating within the EU, discussions with the master and operators were centred around carbon emissions data, route optimisation, and cost forecasts tied to CO₂ allowances³. Agents are now supporting emissions monitoring and coordinating with charterers who are increasingly integrating emissions costs into their decisions. This increasing complexity makes our role not just logistical but calculated.

Similarly, the Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII) adds a real-time performance component to legal compliance. I've seen shipowners adjusting speeds specifically to avoid dropping into a D or E level. Agents are the bond in these scenarios, interacting between the shipping company, terminal, and port authority to align operations with the vessel's emission performance. In a recent case, we coordinated a JIT arrival that saved over six hours of waiting time, reducing emissions and improving the vessel's CII grade⁴.

All of these examples showcase how legal compliance now depends on adaptable, informed, and reactive ship agency. We are not just fulfilling instructions but analysing policy on the fly, balancing compromises, and ensuring vessels remain competitive and compliant in an environmentally conscious market.

MARKET DEMANDS AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF SUSTAINABILITY

While legal frameworks provide the directive, market dynamics now supply the progress. Based on my experience brokering cargoes between North Africa and Southern Europe, I've monitored firsthand how client preferences are evolving to accommodate new maritime challenges. Charterers are no longer focused exclusively on freight rates and availability – they progressively ask more and more about a vessel's emissions profile, fuel type, and even, although in rare instances, its green certifications. In accordance with a 2023 survey by the Global Maritime Forum, over 70% of cargo owners said environmental impact influenced their selection of shipping partners⁵. This isn't just an ecological consciousness matter - it's influencing who gets the business.

The role of the agent in this ever-developing business environment is also evolving. We're being asked to support not only operations but also to contribute to the client's sustainability depiction. This includes offering guidance on which ports offer sustainability incentives - such as discounts for low-emission vessels or energy-efficient shore power connections and accurately advising on the timing and method of bunkering to ensure compliance with low-carbon fuel legislations.

Furthermore, the transition to digitalisation is giving us increasingly more powerful tools to support this demand. The ability to handle documentation electronically, use AI for scheduling vessels, and support data-sharing in real time is no longer optional. These tools have helped us cut processing times and reduce fuel consumption, particularly during calls during increased port congestion. The World Bank has stressed that port digitalisation is one of the fastest and most cost-effective ways to reduce emissions while increasing efficiency⁶.

Banks and cargo owners are observing these trends closely. Ships and agents that can demonstrate a devotion to sustainability-based business primarily backed by certification, documentation, and data are better positioned to access green financing or be nominated for high-value cargoes. As agents, our role in guiding clients towards qualifying for DNV or BIMCO green certification, and indirectly their access to sustainability-linked loans, has become more apparent.

In summary, market expectations are supporting the strategic value of environmental responsibility in the shipping agency. Clients are demanding it, ports are rewarding it, and banks are investing in it. For those of us on the front lines, adopting this change is no longer optional, yet crucial to staying relevant and competitive in a changing industry.

KEY AREAS OF SHIP AGENCY'S CONTRIBUTION TO GREEN SHIPPING

The perceptible impact of ship agents and brokers in furthering sustainable practices is most apparent through their contributions to specific operational areas. By integrating digital tools, promoting fuel transitions, and ensuring compliance with sustainability standards, they are transforming how maritime operations meet environmental expectations.

GREEN PORT CALL OPTIMIZATION

Green port call optimisation is a core area where ship agents streamline vessel operations to reduce emissions and improve efficiency. Just-In-Time (JIT) arrivals enable ships to slow steam toward ports, reducing fuel consumption and carbon emissions. By coordinating JIT operations and ensuring timely clearance procedures, agents help minimise idle times and congestion⁷.

Complementing this is the ever more popular shift to digitalised documentation, which not only enhances speed and accuracy but also decreases the environmental burden of processes based on paper usage. According to a report by the International Association of Ports and Harbours, digitalised documentation can reduce port turnaround times by up to 40%, directly benefiting both efficiency and environmental impact⁸.

In practice, I've seen how JIT arrangements save significant fuel and time. In a recent case, I worked with a container vessel in the Port of Rijeka to align arrival schedules with port availability. This coordination reduced anchorage waiting time by six hours, avoiding unnecessary fuel consumption and emissions. Additionally, by using electronic documentation, the vessel's clearance was processed more almost immediately, which also helped in reducing delays. This demonstrates how ship agents can effectively incorporate JIT planning and digital tools to optimise port operations if they have the necessary support from the terminal. Building JIT and digitalisation, AI-based scheduling tools offer predictive analytics that help shipping companies and agents make more efficient decisions⁹. These tools allow for more accurate berth windows and better synchronisation between vessel movements and port services.

FACILITATING LOW-CARBON AND ALTERNATIVE FUELS AND GREEN SHIP CERTIFICATION AND COMPLIANCE

The maritime industry's transition to alternative fuels such as LNG, methanol, and hydrogen is complex and requires coordination across multiple stakeholders. Ship agents play a vital role in managing these logistical challenges.

Arranging green bunkering operations is no longer just about scheduling; it involves securing permits, coordinating with fuel suppliers, and ensuring safety compliance¹⁰. Handling alternative fuels also means navigating evolving regulations and port-specific requirements. Ship agents now provide consulting services to shipowners, ensuring they comply with new safety and environmental standards¹¹. Based on my knowledge and current experience, clear

communication with both the vessel and local authorities has been essential in managing alternative fuel operations smoothly and safely.

In addition to supporting fuel transitions and port call efficiency, ship agents play a crucial role in helping vessels meet environmental certification requirements. Their involvement ensures that shipowners remain competitive and compliant with global standards and frameworks. With frameworks like the IMO's CII and EU ETS shaping operational practices, agents must interpret complex emission standards and help vessels meet regulatory benchmarks¹². I've been partially involved in helping gather emissions data and submit compliance documents, all of which are critical for maintaining competitive performance ratings.

The DNV and BIMCO Green Ship Certification programs serve as benchmarks for sustainability performance. Ship agents streamline the entire process - from compiling documentation to coordinating with certifiers - helping owners achieve certification that enhances their market positioning.

Participation in green certification programs opens access to financing options tied to sustainability performance. Agents help connect shipowners with banks offering sustainability-related loans and grants, providing additional incentives to pursue green initiatives.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN SHIP AGENCY SERVICES

Sustainability is no longer just a moral or legal requirement; day by day, it is becoming a key element for business success. For brokers and ship agents, it means adapting to sustainable practices, and it offers multiple benefits such as lowering costs, improving reputation, and securing long-term success in a continuously changing industry.

COST SAVINGS AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

One of the most immediate advantages of sustainability in ship agency services is the potential for cost savings and operational efficiency. Practices such as Just-In-Time (JIT) arrivals, digital documentation, and optimised scheduling result in reduced fuel use and shorter port stays. These practices align with environmental goals while lowering expenses related to fuel consumption, demurrage, and idle time. For example, during a recent coordination in the Adriatic region, my team facilitated digital pre-clearance and synchronised pilot services, reducing a vessel's port call by nearly eight hours, which translated into measurable fuel savings and cost reduction.

Additionally, energy-efficient technologies and operational improvements improve the vessel's performance rating, further reducing future regulatory costs and non-compliance penalties. Moreover, the implementation of AI-based tools and predictive analytics allows agents to anticipate challenges and optimize resource use.

ENHANCED MARKET POSITIONING AND CLIENT TRUST

Environmental responsibility is increasingly becoming an important duty of every business executive. Ship agents who offer green services, advice on emissions reduction, and access to cleaner fuels gain a competitive edge, since charterers, cargo owners, and port authorities are becoming more prone to collaborating with partners who demonstrate environmental responsibility¹⁶.

For instance, choosing an agency to handle a sensitive shipment is based on prior business experience, their attention to detail, and their dedication to low-emission operations and green-certified ports. This strengthens client loyalty and opens new business opportunities focused on sustainability.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS AND INDUSTRY RESILIENCE

Sustainability adoption strengthens long-term competitiveness and adaptability. As decarbonization targets tighten and public scrutiny intensifies, companies that do not focus on sustainability risk damage to their reputation, fines, or losing market access¹⁷.

In contrast, agents who integrate sustainable practices into their operations are better prepared to navigate regulatory changes and evolving client demands. This attracts investment, access to green financing, and inclusion in sustainable supply chains. Industry reports show that sustainability-linked financing can offer reduced interest rates, while certified green operations are increasingly recognized as prerequisites for high-value contracts¹⁸.

By aligning environmental responsibility with financial and strategic gains, the business case for sustainability in ship agency services becomes clear. It is a pathway to smarter, more adaptive, and more profitable operations in the maritime industry.

CONCLUSION

The role of ship agents and brokers in driving maritime sustainability is no longer a peripheral consideration, yet central to the industry's transformation. As this paper has demonstrated, agents are evolving from traditional intermediaries into proactive enablers of decarbonization. Drawing from the mentioned cases across the Adriatic and Mediterranean regions, this study highlights how agents and brokers are integrating regulatory compliance, operational efficiency, and commercial strategy to create a more sustainable shipping ecosystem. The analysis has shown that regulatory frameworks such as the IMO's GHG Strategy, EU ETS, and the CII are setting ambitious emissions targets, as well as reshaping the operational landscape for vessels. Agents have become crucial facilitators of compliance through Just-In-Time arrivals, digital documentation, and AI-based scheduling. These tools reduce carbon emissions and generate measurable cost savings and operational efficiencies. The transition to alternative fuels like LNG, methanol, and hydrogen further demonstrates the complexity of maritime sustainability. Ship agents' ability to coordinate bunkering logistics, secure regulatory approvals, and provide practical guidance on compliance is indispensable in this context, which was shown in depth with personal experiences coordinating green bunkering operations. Beyond compliance, the market dynamics analysed in this paper reveal that sustainability is increasingly a key determinant of competitive advantage. Charterers, cargo owners, and financiers are prioritizing green credentials in their decision-making processes, while ports and regulators offer tangible incentives for eco-friendly practices. Agents who embrace these trends are supporting vessel operations, as well as enabling access to high-value cargoes, securing preferential financing, and cementing their reputation as forward-thinking service providers. This shift is reinforced by case studies such as the DNV and BIMCO Green Ship Certification initiatives, which demonstrate how certification and compliance can translate into both environmental and commercial gains. The implications of this shift are far-reaching. As environmental regulations become more stringent and industry expectations continue to grow, ship agents and brokers who do not adapt to sustainability demands may find themselves increasingly sidelined. In contrast, those who integrate environmental considerations into their core operations will strengthen their competitiveness. By doing so, they enhance their ability to attract investment and build strategic alliances. In essence, this paper reconsiders the traditional view of ship agents as passive facilitators and presents a compelling case for their centrality in maritime sustainability. As the industry confronts rising regulatory pressures and environmental responsibilities, these actors are uniquely positioned to influence outcomes through regulatory acumen, operational coordination, and client-driven innovation. By stepping beyond traditional functions and embracing sustainability as a core mandate, ship agents can help shape a more resilient and responsible maritime future—delivering measurable value not only to their clients, but to the sector as a whole.

Moving forward, meeting the demands of decarbonization will require more than compliance. It will make steady investment in technology, closer cooperation with fuel suppliers and port authorities, and a commitment to keeping pace with evolving regulations. Just as importantly, agents must take the lead in promoting a shared responsibility for environmental performance across the supply chain. Those who succeed will not only meet the expectations of today's market, but they will help define the future of the maritime sector.

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