

HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

Briefing Note

A NATIONAL SEAFARER WELFARE LEVY FOR AUSTRALIA

From Voluntary Charity to Essential Maritime Infrastructure

November 2026

www.humanrightsatsea.org

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

© pexels / luciiiiii

Executive Summary

Australia depends on seafarers for more than 99% of its international trade by volume. Every day, thousands of seafarers enter Australian ports carrying the imports and exports that sustain the national economy. Yet the welfare services available to those seafarers remain largely dependent on donations, volunteers, and uncertain local funding arrangements.

Seafarer welfare should no longer be treated as a charitable add-on to maritime transport. Rather, it should be recognised as a critical component of national maritime infrastructure and funded through a modest national levy collected from commercial shipping.

A national levy would provide stable, predictable, and transparent funding for welfare services while imposing negligible cost on individual voyages. It would ensure equitable support across all Australian ports and establish a sustainable foundation for meeting Australia's obligations under international maritime labour and human rights standards.

Disclaimer

This independent Human Rights at Sea report is produced pro bono and in good faith in support of victims and dependents without voice or agency with reference and access to legitimately disclosed open-source and client authorised data. The evidence adduced, submitted, analysed and reviewed may be incomplete and/or subject to emerging updates. At the time of writing, the contents of the report are as accurate as the data disclosed and have been checked by the authors to the extent able and as reasonably necessary. The contents, ownership, and Intellectual Property (IP) of this initial report, its associated work and related processes is that of Human Rights at Sea (HRAS). Copyright applies. No replication, copying, or other use of this work is permitted in any way whatsoever without express written permission, citation, and due consideration. HRAS reserves the right to pursue all relevant remedies for breach of IP and copyright. Reviewers, readers and users implicitly accept this warning by accepting, opening, downloading, or otherwise reviewing this document in either electronic or any other form. Updates, amendments, or issues-of-concern to be raised should be directed by email to enquiries@hrasi.org citing the title, ISBN number and date of issue.

Citation: Human Rights at Sea (HRAS). (2026). A National Seafarer Welfare Levy for Australia. From Voluntary Charity to Essential Maritime Infrastructure.

ISBN: 978-1-0681721-6-8

Acknowledgment: Mr. Paul MacGillivary

The Problem

An Essential Service without Essential Funding

Australian seafarer welfare services provide:

- shore transport
- welfare centres
- communications and internet access
- mental health support
- crisis intervention
- repatriation assistance
- legal referrals
- family liaison
- support for abandoned seafarers
- support following maritime incidents

Despite their importance, these services are primarily funded through:

- donations
- fundraising activities
- local sponsorship
- grants
- volunteer labour

No other critical maritime service is expected to operate on such an uncertain basis.

- Pilotage is funded.
- Port infrastructure is funded.
- Marine navigation services are funded.
- Pollution response is funded.
- Workplace health and safety systems are funded.

Only seafarer welfare remains largely dependent on charitable goodwill.

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

Why Welfare is a Maritime Infrastructure Issue

Safety and Welfare are Inseparable

Fatigue, stress, isolation, mental health challenges, abandonment, and family pressures directly affect:

- crew wellbeing
- operational performance
- accident risk
- environmental risk
- maritime security

The welfare of seafarers is therefore not merely a humanitarian concern; it is an operational and economic concern.

Every maritime regulator accepts that human factors contribute significantly to maritime incidents. Investment in welfare is therefore a preventative investment in safety.

The Equity Argument

The Beneficiary Pays Principle

Australian ports, exporters, importers, shipping lines, and consumers all benefit from the labour of international seafarers, yet the burden of caring for those seafarers falls disproportionately on charities and volunteers.

This creates a structural inequity: The economic benefits of shipping are socialised throughout the economy, while much of the responsibility for welfare remains privatised through charitable organisations.

A national levy would realign responsibility with benefit. Those who benefit from maritime commerce would collectively contribute to the welfare systems that support maritime labour.

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

International Precedent

In a Mission to Seafarers' press release, issued in July 2021, the Rev'd Canon Garry Dodd, Senior Chaplain to the Port of Newcastle and former Regional Director of the Mission to Seafarers in Australia and PNG, correctly and rightfully stated that New Zealand led the way in 2021, becoming the first port state in the world to legislate a mandatory levy on foreign-flag vessels visiting its ports to fund seafarer welfare services.

Human Rights at Sea and the Seafarers Welfare Board for New Zealand also described this as a world-first precedent thereby shifting welfare funding from reliance on charities to a secure, statutory system. Garry's press release was the catalyst for the HRAS Maritime Levy Campaign in Australia and was previously welcomed.

Systems cited in France, Germany, et al have been rightly set up to meet international welfare obligations via flag-state social security systems and MLC compliance. Levies apply to national flag crews/ships. Foreign-flag ships are only subject to welfare access, not levies. The NZ levy applies to all commercial vessels, including foreign-flag ships, calling at NZ ports, not just domestic operators.

New Zealand set the international precedent by legislating a levy that explicitly funds seafarer welfare services. Foreign-flag vessels are included, making the levy a true port-state measure, not just a flag-state obligation.

In sum, New Zealand was indeed the first (and remains the only) port state to apply a mandatory levy on foreign-flag vessels to fund seafarer welfare.

Having said this, various jurisdictions have implemented mechanisms that support seafarer welfare through:

- port welfare funds
- harbour dues allocations
- charitable shipping contributions
- government-supported maritime welfare programmes

So, the principle is recognised internationally: The maritime industry has a shared responsibility to protect the welfare of the workforce upon which global trade depends.

A national levy would provide Australia with a more systematic and transparent version of this principle.

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

Proposed Model – National Seafarer Welfare Levy

The levy could be collected through existing port charging systems.

Potential mechanisms include:

Option 1: Per Vessel Call

A fixed charge per commercial vessel arrival.

For example:

- $50 to $200 per port call.

For a vessel carrying cargo worth millions of dollars, such a charge would be operationally insignificant.

Option 2: Gross Tonnage Formula

A levy based on vessel gross tonnage.

This approach scales payments according to vessel size and commercial activity.

Option 3: Hybrid Model

A combination of:

- minimum fixed charge
- variable tonnage component

This provides both fairness and revenue stability.



© pexels / oleksiy

Governance Principles

Any levy must be accompanied by robust governance.

Reflecting to 2001, with the establishment of port welfare committees in Australia, the way ahead may be "back to the future." Along with members of the newly incorporated National Seafarers Welfare Advisory Council, representatives from the Department of Transport and Regional Services attended NSWAC meetings to ensure that the grant funding for the establishment of PWCs was handled fairly and equitably. As co-directors, we all had fiscal responsibility no differently to any other incorporated body.

The Australian Seafarers Welfare Council could set up a similar incorporated board (composed of some or all members) to look after the maritime levy.

Governance would thus potentially include (ASWC) representation from:

- welfare providers
- shipping industry
- unions
- port authorities
- government
- seafarer representatives

Funds could also be administered by an independent statutory or not-for-profit trust.

Funding Allocation

Allocation criteria could include:

- vessel traffic volumes
- demonstrated welfare demand
- remote port requirements
- emergency response capability
- service performance metrics

This would ensure transparency and accountability.

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

Economic Impact

Minimal Cost, Significant Benefit

Even a relatively small levy could generate substantial annual revenue nationally.

Given the scale of Australian maritime trade:

- cost per voyage would be negligible
- cost per tonne of cargo would be almost invisible
- welfare outcomes would improve substantially

The economic burden on industry would be far outweighed by the benefits derived from:

- reduced welfare crises
- improved crew wellbeing
- stronger maritime reputation
- enhanced compliance with international standards

Strategic Benefits for Australia

A national levy would:

A. Strengthen Maritime Safety

Improved welfare contributes directly to safer vessel operations.

B. Enhance Australia's International Reputation

Australia would be recognised as a leading maritime nation visibly committed to decent treatment of seafarers.

C. Improve Compliance with Human Rights Expectations

The system would help demonstrate practical implementation of international labour and human rights principles.

D. Ensure National Consistency

Services would no longer depend on local fundraising success or volunteer availability.

E. Future-Proof Welfare Provision

Stable revenues would enable long-term planning and workforce development.

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

Conclusion

Australia's maritime economy relies entirely on the work of seafarers, yet the welfare systems supporting them remain financially uncertain and largely charitable.

The current model assumes that essential welfare services can continue indefinitely through goodwill alone. Experience demonstrates otherwise.

A modest national levy would represent a practical, equitable, and economically efficient solution. It would acknowledge that seafarer welfare is not a discretionary charitable activity but an integral element of the maritime transport system.

The central policy question is therefore not whether Australia can afford a national seafarer welfare levy. It is whether Australia can continue to rely upon volunteers and donations to provide an essential service to the people upon whom the nation's maritime trade depends.



© pexels / minimoy

Who We Are

Background

Human Rights at Sea was founded in 2013, formally established in April 2014. It started as an initiative to explore issues of maritime human rights development, review and develop related policies and legislation, and undertake independent investigations of abuses at sea. It rapidly grew and for reasons of governance it became a registered charity under the UK Charity Commission in 2015. It achieved ECOSOC special consultative status in 2022 and evolved in June 2025 to become a non-profit social enterprise Community Interest Company to assure long-term sustainability.

Today, Human Rights at Sea is an established and independent UK registered non-profit organisation based on the south coast of the United Kingdom. It undertakes research and advocacy specifically for human rights issues in the maritime environment, including contributing to support for the human element that underpins the global maritime and fishing industries. We work internationally with all individuals, commercial and maritime community organisations that have similar missions and objectives as ourselves.

UN ECOSOC. We are an organisation in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council 2022.

Our Mission

We advance human rights' protections at sea

We exist to prevent, detect, and remedy human rights abuses at sea. We raise public awareness of abuses at sea, support people at sea to understand their rights, and provide voice and agency.

Stay in Contact

We welcome any reasonable and pertinent questions, comments or suggestions.
Please send your feedback to: Human Rights at Sea CIC, VBS Langstone Technology Park, Langstone Road, Havant, PO9 1SA, UK.

Email: enquiries@humanrightsatsea.org

Donate

As a non-profit social enterprise Community Interest Company (UK) No. 16531943, we rely on voluntary giving, corporate donations and paid-for professional service instructions to maintain our independence and advocacy platforms. Help support our invaluable global impact.
www.humanrightsatsea.org/donate

Social Media

x.com/hratsea

www.linkedin.com/company/human-rights-at-sea/

@humanrightsatsea

Human Rights at Sea (CIC) @humanrightsatsea9379
Human Rights at Sea International @HRASInternational

We are promoting and supporting:

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

THE GLOBAL COMPACT
WE SUPPORT

FSC

Proud to be 'Green'

All of our publications are printed on FSC certified paper so you can be confident that we aren't harming the world's forests. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an international non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting responsible forestry all over the world to ensure they meet the highest environmental and social standards by protecting wildlife habitat and respecting the rights of indigenous local communities.

HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA INTERNATIONAL®
www.hrasi.org

Need business support?

Contact Human Rights at Sea International

www.hrasi.org

enquiries@hrasi.org

www.hrasi.org/contact-us

SCAN HERE

Human Rights at Sea International is a specialist maritime human rights consultancy offering a range of advisory skill-sets and human rights expertise, providing bespoke, objective and independent non-legal advice.

We help you meet and exceed global human rights standards in the maritime environment.

We provide essential business services supporting and addressing your human rights' concerns.

Human Rights at Sea International (HRASi) is a Registered Private Limited Company No. 10762544
HRAS International | VBS | Langstone Technology Park | Langstone Road | Havant | PO9 1SA | UK

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.



© Shutterstock

CALL TO ACTION

Systemic and comprehensive enforcement of fundamental human rights protections at sea without exception

We rely on your donations to bring justice for victims at sea
www.humanrightsatsea.org/donate

www.humanrightsatsea.org | #HumanRightsAtSea

ISBN: 978-1-0681721-6-8

© Human Rights at Sea 2026. All Rights Reserved.

ISBN 978-1-0681721-6-8
9 781068 172168