

Reimagining Trade

15 August 2025

One Planet Shipping Case Study #2

Introduction

Shipping is thriving! Over the past four decades, maritime transport has expanded by roughly 250%. By 2023, the global merchant fleet included more than 100,000 ships, with a total capacity of 2.2 billion deadweight tonnes (DWT) — and the fleet continues to grow.¹ At the same time, shipping presents an increasing risk to the climate and ocean health. It drives unsustainable levels of global production and trade, which are major contributors to climate change and biodiversity loss on land and at sea.

Maritime transport urgently needs a new approach. One Planet Shipping, a Seas At Risk initiative guiding the sector toward sustainability, frames shipping within the limits of our planet. It highlights that a more integrated vision of sustainable shipping can support fair consumption, safe ports, responsible trade, and a just transition. Four themes — Wind First, Reimagining Trade, All Aboard, and Homeward Bound — serve as the guiding principles of this vision.

For each theme, the series of case studies presents two complementary examples to make the One Planet Shipping vision tangible. The first example examines a recent event that disrupted global shipping, causing significant financial, ecological, or social consequences, and reveals the underlying problem. The second introduces a practical solution to that problem, rethinking current models and demonstrating what sustainable shipping can look like within the One Planet Shipping framework.

Summary

Obstruction in the Suez Canal describes how shipping traffic through the Suez Canal was severely disrupted in 2021, when the mega-containership *Ever Given* got wedged in the canal - causing major financial and climate costs and a human toll. The event raises questions about ever-larger ships, ever-longer supply chains and ever-growing volumes of global trade.

But solutions exist: repair, reuse and recycling can cut the need for long-distance, heavy-weighted shipping. *Repair Incentive Systems in Austria* shows how Austria has been a frontrunner in promoting the repair of goods, through both federal and local initiatives. Together with other policies, they represent small but vital steps toward reducing global shipping demand.

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Obstruction in the Suez Canal

The obstruction

The Suez Canal forms a key global trade route. The waterway connects the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, and can handle even more traffic and larger ships than the Panama Canal. Under normal circumstances it allows for passages of more than 1500 ships and more than 100 million tons of goods per month, around 12% of global trade.²

On the morning of 23 March 2021, container ship Ever Given was on its way to the Port of Amsterdam through the Suez Canal. But strong winds and possibly a human error resulted in the 400-meter long vessel getting wedged across the canal.

A massive salvage operation followed, involving 18 tug boats, excavators, a dredging vessel and international cooperation. On 29 March the Ever Given was re-floated and towed to a nearby lake, allowing The Suez Canal to reopen for shipping.

The consequences

The six-day obstruction eventually led to 450 ships queuing on both sides of the canal to transit. Many shipments got delayed and supply chains were interrupted, affecting countless businesses. The canal authorities' revenues took a \$15 million loss per day, and financial analysis suggests the delays cost global trade up to \$10 billion.

Similar to the Panama Canal crisis, lost time compelled ships to sail faster or to reroute their voyages around the African continent, increasing the sailed distance by about 3500 nautical miles.³ For shipping company Maersk Line alone, a study estimated the longer voyages and waiting times due to the incident leading to an increase in carbon dioxide emissions of 44,574 tonnes.⁴

Lastly, the event also had a direct human toll. Sadly, during the salvage operation one assisting vessel sank, leading to the death of one person.⁵

Bigger, longer, more

With its 400m length, 200,000 tonnes displacement and maximum capacity of 20,000 containers, the Ever Given is among the biggest vessels on earth. Since the early 2000s the share of so-called mega-container ships has skyrocketed. Growing volumes of trade and lower shipping costs have made ever-larger ships operating on long-distance trade routes attractive for shipping companies, and there is little to suggest this trend will stop anytime soon.⁶

But bigger vessels also mean smaller margins for navigational error, and greater vulnerability to strong winds. Even if incidents of this scale are rare, the Ever Given obstruction highlights the risks of unchecked ship growth, the unsustainable growth of shipping volumes, as well as the fragility of long supply chains: one single incident can bring the whole global trade system to a halt. This raises questions about how far the pursuit of efficiency can go, before it begins to undermine its own logic.



The Ever Given, stuck with 18,300 containers in the Suez Canal in March 2021. (© Suez Canal Authority)

#1 The State of Shipping and Oceans (2023), Seas At Risk

#2 Suez Canal records highest net tonnage in history in October (2021), Egypt Independent

#3 The cost of the Suez Canal blockage (2021), BBC

#4 The cost of the Suez Canal blockage (2025), University of Gothenburg

#5 Suez Canal Authority says one person died during Ever Given salvage (2021), Lloyd's List

#6 The State of Shipping and Oceans (2023), Seas At Risk

Repair Incentive Systems in Austria

Repair, reuse, recycle

In its report, One Planet Shipping calls out the global dependency of economies on long supply chains, as well as the unsustainable nature and scale of global trade. Instead, it advocates for more localisation and regionalisation of production, resulting in shorter chains with smaller vessels. This could boost local economies and prioritise the reduction of ecological impacts.

To reduce both shipping volumes and the reliance on long supply chains, the Reimagining Trade theme also emphasises a shift toward a lower-consumption and circular economy.⁷ This view is gaining broader traction: in its latest paper, Opportunity Green makes a case for closing the distance between production and consumption, and lowering demand for new production. Repair, reuse and recycling can cut the need for long-distance, heavy-weighted shipping, they argue.⁸

Repairing Austria

Over the last 5 years, momentum has grown in Europe for initiatives that incentivise repairs. Several countries and regions, such as France or some German States, have put into place evaluation and refund mechanisms of different kinds.

Also Austria is a frontrunner. In 2022, the federal government adopted a repair voucher scheme as part of its Environmental Support Act. It allows households to claim back up to 50% of the repair cost to electrical and electronic devices, up to a value of €200. In total, a budget of €130 million was allocated and spread over 4 years, funded by the Austrian Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Plan.⁹ Initial assessments suggest a significant change in behaviour, with 40% of the beneficiaries stating they wouldn't have chosen repair without the scheme.¹⁰

This national action was preceded by more local initiatives. In 2017, the city of Graz set up funding to cover costs of repair cafés on its territory. And in 2020 the city of Vienna founded a repair voucher scheme covering 50% of costs for repairs executed within the Repair Network Vienna.⁹

The European right to repair

The Austrian pilot projects inspired other mechanisms and policies at various levels. In 2024, the EU adopted its Directive on the repair of goods. The Directive provides a 'right to repair' for consumers, obliging manufacturers to repair broken products within a reasonable time and for a reasonable price. It also provides an extension of the legal guarantee and announces a new online platform to connect consumers with repairers.¹¹

Initiatives like these mark an important step forward. Austria's and the EU's policies may seem modest and their impacts hard to measure, but they are vital steps toward shorter supply chains and, ultimately, a reduced demand for mega-container ships. They show how even landlocked regions can contribute to a sufficiency-based global trade system, aligning with the One Planet Shipping vision.



A broken radio gets repaired in a repair café. (© RepairCafeInternational)

#7 One Planet Shipping - Navigating the waves of climate change and overconsumption (2024), Seas At Risk

#8 Reducing shipping emissions by reducing shipping demand (2025), Opportunity Green

#9 A comprehensive overview of the current repair incentive systems: repair funds and vouchers (2024), Right to Repair Europe

#10 What we're calling for in the Repair and Reuse Declaration (2023), The Restart Project

#11 Right to repair: Making repair easier and more appealing to consumers (2024), European Parliament News