



# Draft Report on the ISC Strategy in the Intergovernmental System

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For discussion

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In March 2021, the ISC Chief Executive Officer invited Julia Marton-Lefèvre to chair a [Steering Group](#)<sup>1</sup> and to invite its members. The mandate of the Group is to propose a strategy for the ISC to engage with the intergovernmental system in order to enhance the impact of the Council and strengthen the voice of science in global policy processes, as called for in the [ISC Action plan 2019-2021](#).

The following document is the preliminary report of the Steering Group prepared in July 2021 for the consideration of the ISC Governing Board at its September 2021 meeting, and of the ISC Members at their October 2021 General Assembly. Based on the feedback received, the Steering Group will finalize its report by the end of 2021.

The report was made available to the ISC membership ahead of the General Assembly and comments were invited through an [online feedback form](#) in relation to the following four questions:

1. Does the membership support the ambition of the ISC to position itself as the major mechanism for providing scientific advice to the UN system?
2. What is the role of members in supporting these efforts?
3. Which of the recommendations are the most important for the ISC and for the world?
4. Are there any additional comments you would like to share?

It is also important to note that on 10 September 2021 the United Nations Secretary General launched his report [Our Common Agenda](#) ahead of the UN General Assembly presenting a set of recommendations to reinvigorate multilateralism and enhance global cooperation. Under priority 8 “Upgrade the United Nations”, a recommendation to re-establish the Secretary-General’s Scientific Advisory Board is included. The ISC-appointed Steering Group also made a recommendation for the ISC to advocate for the establishment of a scientific advisory mechanism to the United System. This

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<sup>1</sup> <https://council.science/current/news/group-to-lead-strategy-in-the-intergovernmental-system/>

alignment provides an opportunity to further position the ISC in an advisory role to the intergovernmental system.

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## Preliminary report of the Steering Group advising the ISC on its strategy in the intergovernmental system

**22 July 2021**

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### Background

The [Steering Group](#) chaired by Julia Marton-Lefèvre was established in March 2021 by the ISC Chief Executive Officer with the mandate to propose a strategy for the ISC to engage with the

intergovernmental system in order to enhance the impact of the Council and strengthen the voice of science in global policy processes (as called for in the [ISC Action plan 2019-2021](#) – project 3.1 on science-policy interfaces at the global level). This preliminary report of the Steering Group is prepared for the consideration of the ISC Governing Board at its September 2021 meeting, and of the ISC Members at their October 2021 General Assembly. Based on the feedback received, the Steering Group will finalise its report by the end of 2021.

## The context

All the challenges on the multilateral agenda requiring global cooperation are complex, urgent, have a degree of uncertainty and are inextricably linked. Responding to the global pandemic, reversing biodiversity loss, tackling deepening inequalities, addressing the climate emergency, governing technological change for the public good, transforming to a sustainable, equitable and resilient world all require global cooperation and robust scientific information. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the integrated nature of human and planetary wellbeing and the limitations of current governance arrangements to deal with such issues. The challenge for the UN and global institutions is to mobilize authoritative and integrated knowledge that takes full account of these interactions to inform decision making at multiple levels and steer action towards desired outcomes.

The intergovernmental system spans a very diverse set of organisations with their own governance arrangements and practices of engaging with expert knowledge. The system itself generates a great deal of data and knowledge, carries out and promotes research and knowledge synthesis, and performs technical advisory functions on issues of global concern to a wide range of actors. There are a number of well-documented challenges related to the effective use of science in deliberations and decision-making, including duplication, fragmentation and lack of knowledge integration.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of robust and trusted data and scientific evidence to inform decision-making, creating a window of opportunity for strengthening the contribution of science in global governance.

In this context, the ambition of the ISC to become a *go-to*<sup>2</sup> organisation for scientific expertise and advice at the global level raises key questions for the organisation as a whole:

- What is the ISC's legitimacy and capability to deliver scientific advice?
- Does the ISC have the fundraising capacity to support these ambitions?
- Who are the potential "clients" for scientific advice at the international level and what are their needs?
- How well is the ISC positioned in the policy and political landscape in which it wants to play a scientific advisory role?
- Is the ISC's leadership fully supportive of adding this role to its already full agenda?
- To what extent will ISC's members have the appetite to contribute to realising this ambition?

The ISC will need to be clear on what role(s) it wants to play in the intergovernmental system be they first-hand provider of scientific advice, point of access and convener of scientific expertise or advocate for science. While the ISC is potentially well positioned to play all three roles, tensions may arise in fulfilling these as they require different kinds of resources, positioning and legitimacy to be done successfully.

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<sup>2</sup> This ambition was laid out in project 3.1 of the ISC Action Plan 2019-2021 on Science-policy interfaces at the global level which indicates as anticipated impact: "A strengthened mandate for science in global policy, supported by effective and coordinated science-policy interface mechanisms and based on recognition of the ISC as the global go-to for independent, integrated scientific expertise, input and advice."

## The ISC's strengths and weaknesses

Based on the Group's internal conversations as well as conversations with a limited set of members of the ISC (see Annex 3) and potential clients in the intergovernmental system (see Annex 4), the Steering Group suggests that the ISC's strengths include the following:

- ISC has a unique global membership across 140 countries and 40 international Unions organising and representing the natural and social sciences within a single organisation.
- The ISC, as a non-governmental organisation, is able to act independently.
- It has decades of achievement by its two predecessor organisations<sup>3</sup> (ICSU and ISSC) in mobilising international scientific collaboration on global issues.
- The ISC has a strong convening power within the scientific community.
- It has developed a number of successful technical collaborations, both formal and informal, with UN bodies and other international organizations around specific projects (e.g. WMO, WHO, UNESCO, UNDRR, UNDP).
- It has experience in representing science in the multilateral system through its role as co-organising partner of the Scientific and Technological Community Major Group.

Several weaknesses were also identified:

- The ISC needs to bolster its presence in all the world's regions and include more prominently voices from the Global South.
- It needs to nurture and engage the next generation of scientists.
- There are gaps in disciplines and fields of science in the ISC membership (e.g. life sciences, health and medical sciences, engineering, computing).
- Not all ISC members are well connected to policy processes nor are all members deeply engaged with the ISC.
- The ISC is not yet sufficiently known within the scientific and policy communities, and the media.
- The status of the organisation as an NGO can lead to a misperception of the ISC being primarily an advocacy organization.
- While the ISC integrates the natural and social sciences, it does not yet operate as a transdisciplinary organisation i.e. it does not engage routinely with non-academic actors in the co-design and co-production of knowledge.

## Recommendations

In general, the Steering Group recommends that the ISC needs to create an offer to the intergovernmental system, prioritise its areas of intervention where it has a clear comparative advantage and scale up its ambition over time based on initial successes and lessons learnt. In particular, the ISC is well positioned to focus on emerging issues of public concern and issues where knowledge integration is lacking. If the ISC is serious about this role, it may wish to expand its existing mandate to provide scientific advice to intergovernmental organisations.

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<sup>3</sup> The International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council merged in 2018 to form the International Science Council (ISC).

The specific recommendations of the Steering Group are grouped under four themes in no particular order of priority:

1. Build capacity within the scientific community;
2. Connect the national and global levels;
3. Continue to build relationships in the intergovernmental system; and
4. Champion science as a global public good.



## Continue to enhance capacity within the scientific community

### Recommendation 1: Map the competences and expertise of the ISC.

The ability to access high-quality expertise from across its wide membership and its affiliated bodies is essential for the ISC to succeed in achieving its goal. The ISC draws its legitimacy as a global scientific organisation from its members, and its influence from its ability to convene expertise and deliver scientific inputs in policy and public debates. The ISC secretariat should undertake, and regularly update, a comprehensive mapping of competence and expertise of the ISC membership in terms of its capacity to provide scientific advice and engagement in policy processes. This mapping should identify existing and active relationships with policy processes at national, regional and global levels. Such a mapping should also enable the ISC to respond quickly to requests for identification of experts. All the intergovernmental bodies interviewed for this report and those that the ISC routinely works with, have indicated their interest in working with the ISC to broaden the range of experts they engage with.

### Recommendation 2: Invest in an ambitious capacity building programme on communication and brokerage for ISC members.

A stronger international science-policy interface will rely to a large extent on robust national science, technology and innovation systems and effective science advisory capacities at national level. The ISC, in partnership with others (such as the International Network for Government Science Advice), needs to enhance the capacity of its membership to work effectively at the science-policy interface, especially in countries where such capacity is lacking. It should encourage peer exchange and peer learning on science communication and brokerage and sharing of lessons learnt from successful science-policy-practice mechanisms. A multi-year capacity building programme for ISC members would be a wise investment for the ISC to act and be perceived as a legitimate, effective and inclusive scientific broker.

**Recommendation 3: Partner with other organisations to perform the function of a trusted source of scientific advice.**

There are many organisations that provide knowledge for decision-making, both within and outside the intergovernmental system. In this crowded landscape, ISC should continue to collaborate with other global science organizations with which it already has close links, in particular the InterAcademy Partnership, the World Academy of Sciences, and the World Federation of Engineering Organisations and, if appropriate, with universities. The ISC should also continue strengthening, and where mutually beneficial, expanding its collaboration with intergovernmental bodies that have a mandate to deliver knowledge for decision-making (e.g. WMO). In order to be recognized as the entry point for scientific inputs and advice, ISC should position itself as an organisation with recognised authority and experience in working at the science-policy interface and provide the offer of brokerage in partnership with others.

**Recommendation 4: Engage in existing intergovernmental scientific mechanisms.**

Science is already used extensively in many parts of the intergovernmental system. There is a great deal of data, knowledge and technical advice generated by the intergovernmental system, often in partnership with the scientific community. One such existing mechanism is the well-established global assessment bodies like the IPCC and IPBES<sup>4</sup>, with mandates to assess and synthesise available scientific knowledge in a manner that is policy relevant but not policy prescriptive through a set of carefully negotiated assessment procedures. The ISC and its members should engage proactively in these mechanisms in a supportive and complementary way. In particular, the ISC should continue to connect scientists from its membership to these mechanisms (through the nomination of experts) and could potentially perform other roles such as carrying out external reviews as it has done for IPBES, provide foresight capacity and help communicate and translate the global reports to a variety of audiences including national level decision-makers.

## **Connect the national and global levels**

**Recommendation 5: Strengthening connections of scientists operating in their national context with global processes.**

If requested, the ISC should be ready to convene and facilitate collaboration among scientists involved in national delegations to intergovernmental processes e.g. the international conventions such as

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<sup>4</sup> IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; IPBES: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

UNFCCC and CBD<sup>5</sup> and intergovernmental fora such as the G7 and G20) and provide an independent avenue for scientific inputs. To this end, the ISC should keep its community informed of opportunities to contribute to intergovernmental processes and develop proactive mechanisms to engage them.

### **Recommendation 6: Encourage the creation of a coalition of countries.**

The intergovernmental system is largely governed by member states. While the UN programmes and agencies have an important role in raising attention to issues, framing debates and organising cooperation, the decision-making ultimately rests with the member states. Enhancing the role of science in the intergovernmental system requires support from countries. The ISC, through its membership, should identify countries that can champion science within the key decision-making fora of the UN and other intergovernmental bodies and support the ISC's overall goal. This could take the form of a "Group of Friends of Science" made up of a geographically diverse set of countries including countries that are open to taking on a leadership role (e.g. Small Island Developing States). Focusing on specific themes to be treated by the intergovernmental system would also help in building such coalitions.

## **Strengthen relationships in the intergovernmental system**

### **Recommendation 7: Advocate for the establishment of a scientific advisory mechanism to the UN General Assembly.**

As the SDGs<sup>6</sup> and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic have shown, science is critical to understand and address global challenges. Echoing the call of the UN Secretary General for "science and solidarity" in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, science has a key role to play in informing decisions. The UN has a responsibility to champion science, promote the integration of knowledge on policy issues, and mainstream the use of scientific evidence in decision-making to deliver on its mandate and prepare for future crises. The ISC should advocate for the establishment of a scientific advisory mechanism to the UN General Assembly based on an analysis of the needs of the UN system for scientific evidence, of the lessons learnt from existing and past advisory mechanisms, and of the partnerships needed to operate such knowledge-policy interface effectively. The ISC should offer to coordinate this analysis and support the operationalisation of the new scientific advisory mechanism by acting as its secretariat.

### **Recommendation 8: Seek Permanent Observer status to the UN General Assembly.**

The UN General Assembly is the highest decision-making body of the UN. The ISC should aim to become a Permanent Observer to increase its visibility vis-à-vis UN officials and member states, improve its access to key deliberations, and interact with key decision-makers. The granting of such a status requires a UN resolution to be supported by a significant number of countries and is therefore strongly linked to recommendations 6 and 9. The ISC could also explore opportunities for collaboration

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<sup>5</sup> UNFCCC: UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity

<sup>6</sup> SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals (adopted by nations at the UN in 2015)

and for requesting formal status with other cross-cutting intergovernmental entities that are explicitly set up to promote synergies and integration, such as the Environment Management Group.

#### **Recommendation 9: Set up a liaison office in New York.**

The ISC needs to develop a presence on the ground to be able to interact formally and informally with key players in missions and the UN Secretariat, build a network of influence, and increase its visibility in the political processes of the UN. The ISC should set up a liaison office in New-York and consider establishing offices in other UN sites in the future.

#### **Recommendation 10: Establish a group of ISC Ambassadors**

The ISC needs to build a network of influencers to champion its mission, identify strategic opportunities for positioning science, and access key decision-makers. Such a group of ISC Ambassadors should comprise well-respected and networked individuals who can help build the Council's influence in the intergovernmental system and identify other opportunities where they can make a difference. While operating such a group can be demanding on the secretariat, it may be a useful investment if the group's membership and role are well-defined.

### **Champion science as a global public good**

#### **Recommendation 11: Strengthen the public understanding of the scientific process.**

The ISC needs to set its ambition vis-à-vis the intergovernmental system in the broad context of the science-policy-society interface that implies multiple pathways to achieve influence, and ultimately lead to change, informed by science. The ISC and its members should actively promote science as a global public good. To this end, ISC needs to play a more active and visible role in countering the rise of misinformation and disinformation which profoundly undermines the credibility and impact of science in decision-making.

#### **Recommendation 12: Develop regular engagement with scientific and mainstream media.**

The ISC and its members need to be better known within the scientific and the policy communities as well as the media. This requires for the ISC to engage with public debates and increase significantly its outward-facing communications. The current collaboration with Nature ('Working Scientist' [podcast](#) series dedicated to diversity in science) and the [partnership with the BBC](#) go in this direction. Other actions to consider include regular contributions to scientific journals (like Nature and Science) and regular contributions in mainstream media.

#### **Recommendation 13: Support the recognition and raise the profile of transdisciplinary science.**

There is an increasing call for transdisciplinary research<sup>7</sup> that combines knowledge from different scientific disciplines and from non-academic actors to address complex societal challenges. The ISC

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<sup>7</sup> Transdisciplinarity: research that both integrates academic researchers from different unrelated disciplines and non-academic actors to research a common goal and create new knowledge and theory (Future Earth initial design report 2013).



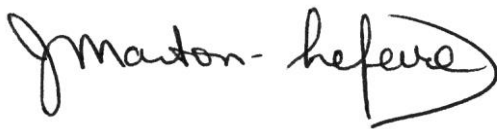
has played an important role in advocating for transdisciplinarity and has identified it as a key area of work, including in relation to how research is evaluated and how science systems and science funding support transdisciplinary and outcome-oriented research. ISC is well positioned to raise the profile of transdisciplinary science and is encouraged to raise funds for the establishment of a prestigious prize to be awarded on a yearly basis (similar to the Tyler Prize<sup>8</sup>). Recognising that the ISC is piloting an awards programme to reward excellence from its membership, the proposal of such a new prize could have a wider reach outside of the ISC membership.

## Towards implementation

The Steering Group acknowledges that the recommendations set out in this document are ambitious, commensurate with the ISC's aspiration to become the "go-to" organisation for scientific advice. It is also aware that their implementation will require a significant and sustained fundraising and management effort.

The development of this report has set in motion a valuable process for the ISC to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities to position the organisation strategically in the global science-policy landscape. The conversations with ISC members and potential 'clients' as listed in annexes 3 and 4 have been particularly helpful in this regard and will merit a follow-up by the ISC Governing Board and secretariat once the next steps have been agreed.

The Steering Group will be pleased to continue working on the next steps once it has received the feedback of the ISC's Governing Board and the membership on this preliminary report.



Julia Marton-Lefèvre

Chair of the Steering Group to propose a strategy for the ISC to engage with the intergovernmental system

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<sup>8</sup> The Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement, established in 1973 [www.tylperprize.org](http://www.tylperprize.org)

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Composition of the Steering Group

Name	Current affiliation
Julia Marton Lefèvre (Chair)	Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Alliance of Biodiversity International and CIAT; the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement; the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and the Strategic Advisory Council to the French think tank, IDDRI. Former Executive Director of ICSU and Director General of IUCN.
Salvatore Aricò	Head, Ocean Science Section Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO
Pearl Dykstra	Professor of Empirical Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Member of the ISC Governing Board
Ruben G. Echeverria	Senior Research Fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
Xiaolan Fu	Founding Director of the Technology and Management Centre for Development (TMCD), Professor of Technology and International Development, University of Oxford and Fellow of Green Templeton College.
Peter Gluckman	President-Elect of the ISC, member of the ISC Executive Board and founding Chair of the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA)
Maria Ivanova	Associate Professor of Global Governance and Director of the Center for Governance and Sustainability at the John W McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston
Michel Jarraud	Secretary General Emeritus – World Meteorological Organization
Roberto Lenton	Professor Emeritus of Biological Systems Engineering at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Daugherty Distinguished Fellow at the Robert B. Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute at the University of Nebraska
Diana Mangalagiu	Professor at the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford and Neoma Business School, France and Adjunct Professor at Sciences Po
Marcos Regis da Silva	Executive Director, Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI)
H.E. Judi Wakhungu	Ambassador of Kenya to the French Republic, Portugal, Serbia & Holy See

**Secretariat:** Anne-Sophie Stevance, Anda Popovici and Mathieu Denis

## Annex 2: Process and Timeline for the development of the strategy

March 2021	Appointment of the Steering Group
30 March	<a href="#">First virtual meeting of the Steering Group</a>
30 April	<a href="#">Second virtual meeting of the Steering Group</a>
May - June	Discussions with a few ISC members
26 May	<a href="#">Third virtual meeting of the Steering Group</a>
30 June	<a href="#">Fourth virtual meeting of the Steering Group</a>
June-July	Discussions with potential 'clients' in the intergovernmental system
July	Drafting of the preliminary report
15 July	<a href="#">Fifth virtual meeting of the Steering Group</a>
6-7 September	Presentation of the preliminary report to the ISC Governing Board
15 October	Presentation of the preliminary report to the ISC General Assembly
November	<a href="#">Sixth meeting of the Steering Group (TBC)</a>
End of 2021	Finalisation of the report and submission to the ISC Governing Board

### Annex 3: List of members interviewed

Twelve one-on-one discussions between members of the Steering Group and members of the ISC were held during May and June 2021 to assess the interest, capabilities and experience of ISC members in working with the intergovernmental system, the expectations vis-à-vis the ISC on policy work, and the willingness to represent and act on behalf of the ISC in global fora.

The organisations and individuals interviewed were identified by the ISC secretariat with attention to diversity across the categories of membership, and across regions.

ISC member interviewed	
Unions and Associations	
	International Union of Biological Sciences (IUBS)
	International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics (IUGG)
	International Geographical Union (IGU)
	International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS)
	International Sociological Association (ISA)
National members	
	Academia Colombiana de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales
	Kenya National Academy of Sciences
	Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters and University of Bergen and University of Bergen
	The Royal Society
	Science Council of Japan
	South Africa National Research Foundation <i>(Interview done by the ISC secretariat)</i>
	US National Academy of Sciences

#### **Annex 4: List of clients interviewed**

Steering Group members volunteered to talk with some potential key clients to understand the extent to which the ISC is known, discuss its strengths and the potential science needs and gaps that it could respond to. These discussions took place between June and July 2021 and, if time permits, other conversations may follow.

One-on-one conversations were held with the following individuals:

- Ismahane Elouafi, Chief Scientist of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- Anne Larigauderie, Executive Secretary of the Intergovernmental Science-policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)
- Elena Manaenkova, Deputy Secretary General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
- Abdalah Mokssit, Executive Secretary of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- Andreas Schaal, Director of Global Relations at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- Julia Slingo, Chair of the Review of the World Climate Research Programme (2018) and former chief scientist of the UK Met Office