



ADVISORY NOTE

Procedures for addressing threats to scientific freedom

Background

The Principle of Freedom and Responsibility in Science is set out in the International Science Council's [Statute 7](#), and is fundamental to the Council's vision of science as a global public good. The Committee for Freedom and Responsibility in Science (CFRS) oversees the Council's commitment to this principle.

ISC Statute 7: Principle of Freedom and Responsibility:

The free and responsible practice of science is fundamental to scientific advancement and human and environmental wellbeing. Such practice, in all its aspects, requires freedom of movement, association, expression and communication for scientists, as well as equitable access to data, information, and other resources for research. It requires responsibility at all levels to carry out and communicate scientific work with integrity, respect, fairness, trustworthiness, and transparency, recognizing its benefits and possible harms.

In advocating the free and responsible practice of science, the Council promotes equitable opportunities for access to science and its benefits, and opposes discrimination based on such factors as ethnic origin, religion, citizenship, language, political or other opinion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or age.

The following procedures are used by CFRS to identify, select, respond to, and monitor, cases where scientific freedom is threatened.

Case identification

Threats to freedom arise from general attacks on the values of science such as those driven by government policy or the socio-economic environment, and through individual cases of discrimination, harassment or restriction of movement based on factors related to political or other opinions, ethnic origin, language, religion, citizenship, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or age.

CFRS monitors these threats through a portfolio of cases where the freedoms of individual scientists ('individual cases'), or of a wider group of scientists ('generic cases'), are restricted or at risk.

Potential cases typically arise through media coverage, or are brought to the Committee's attention by ISC Members, affiliated bodies and partners. Potential cases may also become apparent through routine information sharing with relevant international networks including, for example, Scholars at

Risk, the Committee for Concerned Scientists and the International Human Rights Network of Academics and Scholarly Societies.

The [CFRS Special Advisor](#) is responsible for researching potential new cases when they are raised, and advising the Committee on decisions relating to case selection and response. ISC Members can signal a case they wish to raise with the Committee by contacting the [CFRS Executive Secretary](#).

Case selection for monitoring and response

Threats to scientific freedom can be complex, and it may be difficult to disentangle the scientific, political, human rights or socio-economic aspects of specific cases. CFRS uses the following criteria to guide their case selection:

- The issue(s) must be concerned substantially with science, or with the freedom of individuals as a consequence of pursuing scientific activities (human rights cases which happen to involve a scientist are generally out of scope);
- The issue should generally be one for which ISC can take a public view for transparency and maximum impact and for which there is a feasible pathway to impact. However, this does not preclude initiating non-public action where this is more appropriate, or taking stances even if positive influence is unlikely;
- There should be sufficient evidence available to support a defensible ISC position and which enables ISC's views to be crafted in a way which avoids perception of advocacy or uninformed opinion.

Materiality is also a factor in selecting cases – those with wider implications and global public interest, or where the health and safety of individuals is at stake, are given higher priority.

Selected cases are those which the Committee chooses to monitor and/or act upon. Cases which are not selected by CFRS may be referred to other relevant international networks and organisations.

Case responses

When a new case is accepted, CFRS decides whether to respond with a course of action, or to monitor further developments. Actions are determined on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the sensitivity and severity of the situation, and the views of relevant ISC Members. Potential actions include:

- Letters: private or open letters may be sent by the Chair of CFRS or the ISC President to relevant ISC Members, institutions, or Heads of States.
- Announcements: public comments about cases may be made on social media and/or the ISC website.
- Statements: a public position adopted by the CFRS and endorsed by the ISC Governing Board.
- Commentaries: commentaries in the form of opinion pieces, editorials, etc. may be published by members of CFRS.

Where CFRS agrees to act, this would typically be preceded by correspondence with the relevant ISC Member/s. It is appropriate and often the case that Members also act, e.g. by issuing their own statement or publicizing the matter on social media.



Privacy and confidentiality are often factors in responding to individual cases, particularly where judicial processes or imprisonment are involved. ISC's response may not be able to be published in such cases.

Governance

In sensitive situations requiring a rapid response, the decision-making is not straightforward. The need for timely response often dictates that the full CFRS cannot be engaged in initial discussions. Immediate decisions are made by the CFRS Chair, on advice from the CFRS Vice-Chair, CFRS Special Advisor and CFRS Executive Secretary. Decisions made by this core group are subsequently notified to the full committee. The full portfolio of current cases is discussed by the full committee at least twice per year at virtual or in-person meetings. A high level summary of the portfolio of cases is reported publicly following CFRS meetings.

The CFRS Chair also decides if and how to involve the ISC Governing Board on case responses, particularly when the ISC is issuing a substantial public statement. In the event of responses dealing with particularly sensitive matter, or signalling a significant position by CFRS and by implication the ISC, the draft version must be endorsed by the GB, or depending on the urgency of the situation, by the Officers of the GB.

Examples of case actions by CFRS

- [Statement on protecting human rights and scientific freedom in Myanmar \(issued 6 April 2021\).](#)
- [Statement on detention and capital sentence of Ahmadreza Djalali \(issued 8 December 2020\).](#)
- [Statement on Scientific Freedom in Japan \(issued 26 November 2020\).](#)
- [Statement calling for the release of researchers associated with the Persian Heritage Wildlife Foundation currently detained in Iran \(issued 26 August 2020\).](#)

Monitoring Cases

The [CFRS Special Advisor](#) is responsible for monitoring both new and previously selected cases on behalf of the Committee. This involves liaising with international networks, following media reports, and contacting ISC/CFRS Members for information and developments. Cases are actively monitored until they are closed, or until such time as they become dormant, perhaps temporarily, as a result of no progress or action.

Information about cases may be published on the ISC website or social media platforms as part of the CFRS response. ISC Members can request additional information about cases directly from the [CFRS Special Advisor](#) or [Executive Secretary](#), but details of some cases may be considered confidential by the Committee.

Closing Cases

Cases are closed when the threat to freedom is resolved (e.g. a person is released from prison) or when CFRS determines that no further useful action can be taken by ISC.