

THIRD ISC GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Draft ISC Strategic Plan 2025–2028

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For discussion



**International
Science Council**

وزارة التعليم العالي
و البحث العلمي والابتكار
Ministry of Higher Education
Research & Innovation



Draft ISC Strategic Plan 2025–2028

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I. Introduction: Working towards the vision of science as a global public good

The world in 2024 is confronted by major societal challenges, including multiple environmental crises, deepening social inequalities and polarization, international armed conflict, disruptive technologies, and precarious health and wellbeing. These challenges intersect and interact with each other in complex and unpredictable ways. They also influence and reflect challenges in science systems across the world, including inequalities in science, pressures on scientific freedom, responsibility and integrity, tensions between different value and knowledge systems, politicization of science, and declining trust in science as an institution—all of which make it difficult for science to make its best and necessary contribution to society.

The vision of the International Science Council (ISC) is of science as a global public good, meaning that scientific knowledge and practice should universally be considered a shared resource from which everyone should be able to benefit regardless of their location, gender, economic status, cultural background or other characteristics. To realize its vision, the mission of the Council is to provide a powerful, effective and credible global voice for science.

This Strategic Plan sets out the priorities that will orient its activities over the period 2025–2028, recognizing that we live in a very fluid and changing context for science. The Governing Board will regularly assess and review priorities, considering: (1) available resources; (2) the principles underpinning ISC action; (3) the capacities and strengths of the ISC Secretariat and membership; and (4) the unique and distinctive contribution the ISC can make, either on its own or in partnership.

II. The unique ISC role

As a non-governmental organization with an international mandate and a pluralistic membership of over 250 national and international scientific bodies, the ISC federates and represents the scientific community across national and disciplinary borders. Being independent of specific geostrategic interests, and with partnerships across the research ecosystem and the multilateral system, the ISC serves as an impartial platform to set and advance international scientific agendas and to support the governance of science and technology for the benefit of society at regional and global levels.

The ISC, through its predecessor organizations, ICSU and the ISSC, has a long history of impact in science coordination, science advice and science diplomacy, facilitating international collaboration in areas like environmental change, space research, and data standards and sharing. In recent years, mandated by its Members as reflected in its Statutes (2024), the ISC has strengthened its capacity at the science-policy-society interface with proactive engagement in the multilateral system. This strategy has resulted in the forging of action-oriented partnerships with key multilateral organizations. The recently established Centre for Science Futures provides an exploratory space for membership to engage with new ideas in science, its coordination and potential evolution.

III. Principles of action

ISC actions are underpinned by the following principles. They should:

- a. Address complex issues of global significance which are of concern to a significant number of our Members, which require international, interdisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary collaboration, and which have the potential for impact on science, practice and policy.
- b. Seek to redress global knowledge divides.
- c. Respect the ISC core values as laid out in the Statutes.
- d. Prioritize areas where it is uniquely placed to have impact, partnering with other organizations where appropriate.

IV. The strategic priorities

The revised Statutes and Rules of Procedure (2024) inform the strategic priorities. They define the general areas for action, reflecting the strengths and capacities of the ISC and building on the membership base and partners in the science and policy arenas.

They are:

- Freedom, responsibility and inclusivity in science
- International science agenda-setting
- The evolution of science
- Evidence-based policy making
- Science diplomacy

Priority area 1: Freedom, responsibility and inclusivity in science

Pursuing the vision of science as a global public good means ensuring that the scientific process is trustworthy, that the practice of science is free, responsible, equitable and inclusive, and that scientists contribute their knowledge in the public space. The principles of freedom and responsibility in science are enshrined in Statute 8 of the Council's Statutes and Rules of Procedure (2024).

These principles are more important than ever in the context of growing scepticism, misinformation and distrust in institutions, which is threatening the credibility of science, and political and economic pressures that restrict scientific freedom and the independence of scientific inquiry. Responsibility in science is vital in the light of scientific and technological advances that offer great advantages but also significant risks, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and synthetic biology. Science itself is undergoing change. AI will significantly change the production and reporting of knowledge. The private sector is a far greater producer of both discoveries and applied science. Stakeholder engagement is needed for science to become actionable. Structural and systemic inequalities as well as short- and long-term crises are hampering access to the production and use of scientific knowledge in ways which are detrimental to science and society.

Areas of action

1. Freedom and Responsibility watchdog function

The Council's Committee for Freedom and Responsibility in Science (CFRS) monitors individual and general cases of scientists whose freedoms and rights are restricted as a result of carrying out their scientific research, or while acting as scientists, and provides assistance in such cases where its intervention can leverage relief and support activities of other relevant actors. The CFRS responses and actions include public announcements or statements, commentaries, and letters to the heads of relevant authorities. This work is often not visible, in order to protect privacy or the safety of individuals.

2. The right to science

The Council and its partners will improve understanding of and advocacy for the right to participate in and benefit from science, irrespective of gender, race, ability, socioeconomic status and community, through elaboration of normative concepts in, and guidelines for, the right to science, and related awareness campaigns.

3. Scientific integrity in an era of emerging technologies

There are new challenges in defining scientific integrity as fundamental changes in the way science is performed and reported keep pace with emerging technologies. Increasingly, such research may involve relationships and interactions between the public and the private sector.

The changed nature of science has implications for the responsible conduct of science and sustaining or enhancing the trustworthiness of science. Through broad engagement, the Council will shape and promote an updated concept of scientific integrity.

4. Science in times of crisis

Through Members and partnerships, the ISC will mobilize support and resources for displaced scientists and to ensure science systems can recover when the crisis subsides.

5. Gender equality in science

The ISC will work with its partners to establish, monitor, share, and promote the use of, evidence on gender policies and programmes in scientific organizations.

Priority area 2: International science agenda-setting

Global challenges such as biodiversity loss, food security, climate change, inequalities and public health are complex and interconnected. A solution in one area has the potential to create unintended consequences in another area. Planetary stewardship moreover extends beyond national borders. The atmosphere, ocean, polar regions and space are shared, and without a shared scientific agenda and advocacy in the policy space, they are extremely vulnerable.

The nature of the challenges facing us demands cross-disciplinary, cross-border and cross-sectoral responses, including non-academic forms of knowledge, and coordinated science agendas on issues of global concern.

Areas of action

1. Identifying and acting on emerging issues of global concern

The ISC will establish a systematic horizon-scanning process with Members, Affiliated Bodies and partners to identify emerging issues for the science agenda.

As an outcome, the ISC will convene the Membership to act on such emerging issues, for example through landscape mapping, reports, fundraising, or raising such issues within policy forums.

2. Sustainability

The Council will implement a critical mass of science missions for sustainability in support of the Sustainable Development Goals at multiple scales, documenting and sharing the learnings from these missions.

The Council will jointly convene the International Polar Year in 2032, with long-term planning already underway. As with previous polar years, this provides the opportunity for scientific coordination and agenda setting, including the involvement of natural and social sciences, science diplomacy, protection and governance of the global commons.

The Council, its members and partners, will participate in the 2025 UN Ocean Conference, advocating for issues raised by members, and promoting sustained opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration aligned with the UN Ocean Decade.

The ISC, together with key strategic partners, will coordinate science and science-policy-society interfaces on challenges relating to the environmental commons, including plastic pollution, food security and climate change.

3. Human and societal development

The Council will convene the breadth of its community on approaches to inequality, societal polarization, well-being, and lack of trust in institutions (including scientific institutions). These issues intersect with sustainability challenges and emerging technologies. Outcomes are likely to include interventions in multilateral policy forums and increased advocacy for funding of social sciences.

4. Fundamental science as a gateway to development

The crucial role of fundamental science in underpinning the broader sustainable development agenda will be highlighted by the Council within policy and funding forums, and through support of member-led activities.

Priority area 3: The evolution of science

The world of science is changing. Global centres of scientific production are shifting, with increasing contributions from the Global South, and so is the balance of knowledge production between the public and private sector. Technology is changing the way science is conducted and reported. Misaligned incentives and uncoordinated stakeholder interests are hindering science's ability to meet societal needs. The ISC monitors and informs on changes in science practices and science systems, to better influence their evolution.

Driving change for the public good will require the participation of the full spectrum of the scientific community as well as multiple other stakeholders: funders, publishers, policy-makers, technology firms, academic and research institutions, research infrastructure providers, networks and research platforms.

Areas of action

1. Monitoring trends in science systems

The Centre for Science Futures' key role is to take a longer-term view of how science and science systems will evolve, both integrating the expertise of Members and advising on the opportunities and challenges ahead.

The ISC will, in conjunction with partners, assess the impacts of emerging technologies on the production and the reporting of science and contribute to global discussions and social and ethical issues arising from the use of these technologies.

2. Science education

The ISC has reviewed where it might focus its particular capacities and has identified the need to provide guidelines and principles on the broader education of scientists beyond their disciplinary skills.

3. Transdisciplinary science

Building on the ISC's work on the value and challenges of undertaking transdisciplinary research, the Council will continue to build capacity of Members and partners to produce actionable knowledge through high quality transdisciplinary research. It will assist the research funding community, including private research funders, to mainstream transdisciplinary science into their efforts and work to identify appropriate means of assessment for such research.

4. Research assessment

The ISC can act as a global and regional forum for relevant stakeholders (the scientific community, funders, publishers, consortia of universities, the private sector) to define the needs for changes in scientific publishing and research assessment, and to support and align different existing initiatives.

5. Open science, science publishing

The ISC will facilitate dialogues between relevant parties in the reform of scientific publishing. The ISC is committed to the goal of advancing equitable access to publishing and to the results of scientific research through open science and addressing the many challenges to it.

Priority area 4: Evidence-based policymaking

While science is recognized as an important part of the solutions to many global issues, the gap between available knowledge and policy action is widening, and trends of mis-information and dis-information, inequalities and conflict threaten cooperation at a time when it is most needed. New forms of public engagement and approaches to accessing and using information demand more agile and contextualized approaches at the science-policy-society interfaces. The scientific community needs to strengthen its collective capabilities in synthesizing and translating scientific information, and in communicating the limitations and implications of science.

Areas of action

1. Delivering science advice to the multilateral system

The Council will contribute to evidence-based decision- and policy-making by mobilizing relevant expertise from within the ISC membership in the brokerage between science and policy at multiple scales, from national to multilateral, on diverse issues and at diverse fora.

The ISC will work with key components of the multilateral system including members states and the UN Secretary General's office to assist with ensuring that expert and pluralistic brokerage is available.

2. Enhancing Members' science advice capabilities

In order to enhance the capacity of Members to provide science advice to governments and understand the science-policy brokerage function, the ISC will provide tailored training, designed and delivered with Affiliated Bodies and Members.

3. Shaping the science-policy interface

The ISC will advise on and assist with the development of new and/or enhanced interface mechanisms in the multilateral system to better mobilize scientific knowledge for evidence-based policy-making to support transformative change within and across different contexts and levels.

Priority area 5: Science diplomacy

From global pandemics requiring scientific collaboration and exchange, to pressures to explore and exploit space or the deep sea, global risks and the protection of global commons necessitate a stronger engagement of science in international policy and diplomatic debates. The knowledge, capacity and resource divides between countries undermine the ability of nations to contribute individually and collectively to solutions; they also undermine trust in institutional ability to deliver fair and global outcomes. Conversely, growing and persistent diplomatic tensions between countries are also affecting science, including what science is prioritized, how science is produced and shared, and what collaborations are encouraged or discouraged. The goal is to harness the role of science in facilitating peaceful dialogues.

Science diplomacy as a field is evolving and is receiving increasing attention as an important function for science in the current geopolitical situation. The ISC will use its unique position as the world's largest non-governmental organization representing the active science community to undertake relevant activities as opportunities arise.

Areas of action

1. Multi-lateral science diplomacy

The Council will further develop partnerships with the key and most relevant parts of the multilateral system, in particular with the UN system and organizations in New York and Geneva, to ensure better communication between the global voice for science and the global policy community.

The Council will facilitate debates and fora with multilateral agencies on scientific issues that present major political, economic and security implications.

2. Regional and country-level science diplomacy

The ISC network of Members will work together to strengthen scientific inputs into foreign ministries and diplomatic missions.

The Council will leverage its capacities and ability to bridge beyond geostrategic divides to support efforts at reducing tensions and promoting cooperation.

V. The ISC community

The ISC is first and foremost a membership organization. The achievement of its vision and strategic priorities depends on having an empowered and cohesive membership, a close network of Affiliated Bodies, an engaged Fellowship and productive partnerships. The ISC will do the following to engage and support its Members and the extended 'family'.

1. Increasing membership engagement and interaction

The ISC Secretariat will continue to work closely with Members to maximize opportunities to engage with each other and with the ISC in the delivery of the strategic priorities. The Secretariat will continue its regular, tailored communication with Members and stakeholder mailing lists and other platforms to keep them apprised of opportunities and news at the ISC and among the ISC family.

The premier occasion for the Members to meet each other in person and take strategic decisions is the ordinary session of the General Assembly, the next one being in January 2025 followed by late 2028. In response to demand from Members a midterm meeting without voting business is inscribed in the Statutes and Rules of Procedure. The next one will fall in late 2026.

The Secretariat will endeavour to facilitate initiatives of the Members to organize and undertake activities among subgroups, e.g. among union members or topical interest groups.

2. Ensuring representativity and inclusiveness in the membership

For the ISC to be maximally effective, it is vital that the ISC membership reflect the full spectrum of sciences as well as possible, including natural, social, mathematical, medical and engineering sciences and science-related humanities. Efforts will continue to add to its membership base in scientific domains not well represented and to engage early- and mid-career scientists and researchers (EMCR) even more systematically in its membership, bodies and activities. The membership of the ISC should also be globally representative of the scientific community. It is a priority to extend the membership into countries where the ISC does not currently have a national Member and to consolidate the ISC's presence, networks and relevance in all regions, particularly in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

3. Capacity development for ISC Members

The ISC will continue to help its Members help each other to build capacity through knowledge exchange, collaboration, skill building and mentorship in critical areas such as digital transformation, science communication and science-policy engagement.

4. Increasing the ISC's reach through the ISC Fellowship and ISC Patron(s)

By 2028 the Fellowship will have reached its intended capacity of 600–700 Fellows and will be a rich resource for the ISC and the Members to draw on for expertise, counsel and influence. Fellows will be mobilized to help identify opportunities for the ISC, deliver the Council's programmes of work and promote that work among key communities.

5. Developing partnerships

The ISC will cultivate partnerships and promote coordination with key actors in the global science and policy ecosystem, including at regional and global level. The new Category 4 membership category allows for actors in the broader science ecosystem to become observer Members of the ISC.

6. A fairer and more sustainable Membership dues structure

A Working Group has been established to revise the ISC dues structure, with the aim of presenting a

proposal for the approval of the membership before the end of 2025 and application as of 2026. The aim of the revision of the dues structure will be to unify the parallel dues systems of former ICSU and ISSC Members and to develop a fairer, more acceptable and more sustainable dues structure, in the context of increasing pressures on our Members' own finances.

VI. Resources and infrastructure

1. Establishing a curated database of experts

To have capacity to respond rapidly to opportunities to contribute to international science-policy-society interfaces, and to diversify the pool of experts that it can call on to drive its activities, the ISC will develop its curated database of experts drawn from Member and self-nominations, ISC Fellows and partners.

2. Diversifying income streams

To maintain the current high level of activity and achievement going forward, income will have to increase. As income from membership dues is, however, not expected to rise substantially in the coming years, new sources of income will be required to sustain the ISC's increased ambitions.

The key avenue to increasing the Secretariat's financial capacity is to develop philanthropic giving and additional support from donor nations. The ISC Foundation UK, a charitable trust based in the UK, is operational and able to receive funds. The ISC needs to develop and sustain relationships with philanthropic organizations and donors whose interests and practices align with the vision and values of the ISC, which will require investment in fundraising and marketing. When external funders support discrete projects, they must cover the real costs.

3. Increasing secretariat capacities

The Council intends to increase its operational capacity in various ways:

- A secondment scheme, whereby ISC Members can 'donate' expertise to the ISC in the form of a staff member who works at the ISC for 12–18 months in the framework of an 'Expertise-based Philanthropy Agreement'.
- Establishing new regional structures, notably in central Asia, Africa and the Middle East regions.
- Engaging and facilitating Members in the leadership and delivery of projects.
- Adopting and leveraging new tools, including digital tools, to work more efficiently, effectively and inclusively and to build the capacity of its Members.

A priority for the Secretariat is to maintain and enhance the Council's communications and outreach capability, ensuring that it is able to provide a responsive resource for Members, as well as an effective source of information for wider publics.

4. Improving inclusivity and sustainability

The Council will work to ensure that inclusivity and sustainability are prioritized in its ways of working, through rigorous respect of its values and application of its policies.