

# Strengthening Science Advice at the United Nations General Assembly

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**Executive Summary:** *In response to the growing complexity of global challenges, the integration of science advice (SA) at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is essential for informed, equitable policymaking. Despite an increased demand and need for evidence-based guidance, the UNGA lacks a formalised science advice mechanism (SAM), leading to fragmented and inconsistent use of evidence. In collaboration with the International Science Council (ISC), this study aims to understand the current landscape of SA at the UNGA and explore pathways for strengthening evidence-based decision-making within this global body. The research drew from both primary interview data and secondary literature review data, highlighting insights into the formal and informal channels of evidence provision, the challenges within the current SA mechanisms, and potential strategies for establishing a robust, institutionalised SA framework at the UNGA.*

## Current SA Landscape at the UNGA

- Although the UNGA has internal processes to integrate evidence at various stages of policymaking, a **systematic, institutionalized mechanism is notably absent**. Instead, science and evidentiary input flows through a disjointed mix of formal, informal, and ad-hoc channels.
- **Member States primarily rely on their own national science-policy interfaces and specialized UN agencies** for evidence to support policy positions.
- However, **informal channels** of evidence provision also play a crucial role in shaping discussions and decisions, serving as a channel for scientists and advocates to promote evidence in behind-the-scenes exchanges.
- The **President of the General Assembly** holds a particular influence, shaping the UNGA agenda and the flow of evidence into the deliberative processes.

## Main Challenges

A broad array of issues emerged regarding the state of science advice at the UNGA. In no particular order, these include:

### Lack of lasting Mandate

Without a clear mandate that survives the 2030 SDGs, SA at the UNGA lacks consistency and permanence in integration and accountability for its application.

### Inequities in National Science Capacities

Many MS permanent missions have limited resources, hampering their ability to access and apply evidence effectively and manage the ever-expanding UN agenda. Since Member States often rely heavily on their own national science-policy interfaces, preexisting inequalities in national science and research capacities are inadvertently perpetuated and prevail.

### Fragmented SA Channels

Current SA channels are poorly connected, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for evidence use, differences in research quality, and an excess of uncoordinated efforts.

### Ineffective Stakeholder Inclusion

While access to external stakeholders exists, it does not equal to meaningful multistakeholder engagement. Including external stakeholders into policy deliberations is necessary to increase the UNGA's evidence base and the credibility and legitimacy of its decisions.

### Multilateral Politics

The nature of the UNGA yields prioritisation of national interests and political considerations in its deliberations, which can impede the integration of science advice. The dominance of political dynamics sometimes leads to resistance toward science-based solutions, limiting the UNGA's ability to fully leverage scientific insights in addressing global challenges. Likewise, consensus has yet to be reached on the role of science in the UNGA. Some MS see it as a universal bridge, others as another stakeholder.

### **Balancing Formality and Flexibility**

While informal channels of exchange and evidence provision are flexible, quick and relevant for interpersonal relationships, they can be exclusive and untransparent. Formal approaches usually require lengthy processes and agreement on the formalities. Finding a healthy balance between formal and informal approaches is a crucial challenge.

### **Missing Guidelines**

A lack of defined protocols leads to variable standards in evidence quality, limited accountability, and challenges in assessing and validating the relevance of different knowledge types.

## **Key Factors for an Effective SAM or Framework**

The absence of an institutionalised, formal, and centralized SA arrangement within the UNGA contributes to these challenges. The data and subsequent report recommendations suggest that establishing such an arrangement would facilitate more effective integration of evidence into UNGA deliberations and decision-making processes. Literature and interview data co-validated core elements for a robust SAM appropriate for the UNGA, including:

- **Clear Mandate:** a clear mandate not tied to the 2030 Agenda ensures structured, lasting SA integration.
- **Coproduction:** effective, transparent communication channels between evidence producers and users are essential to increase evidence relevance and foster crucial dialogue between policymakers and evidence providers to support coproduction of policy. Knowledge brokers, like the ISC, play a special role in linking the policy and science worlds.
- **Inclusivity:** broader, more meaningful stakeholder engagement enhances legitimacy and diversity in evidence representation and deliberation.
- **Adaptability:** the UNGA SAM must be able to respond to new scientific information, demand-side changes, short- and long-term evidence requests.
- **Effective, Centralised Advice:** Advice must be credible, relevant, and legitimate, with a centralised request and provision process to streamline evidence incorporation. Transdisciplinary collaboration and diverse knowledge sources are essential for addressing complex, cross-cutting policy areas. Additionally, tailoring evidence outputs in accessible formats for recipients enhances usability and supports evidence-informed decision-making.
- **Independence:** Advice providers must be perceived as neutral to have MS trust and credibility. A sustainable funding model, ideally UN-budgeted or following the IPCC's voluntary contributions model, would enhance SA integrity and trust.

## **Key Recommendations for Action**

### **> Establish an institutionalised UNGA Science Advice Mechanism:**

Create a formal SAM with a clear mandate to provide structured, consistent, and accessible scientific advice relevant to the UNGA's annual agenda. Centralise the provision of SA with formalised procedures for both short- and long-term evidence needs and obligatory policymaker engagement, ensuring evidence relevance and utilisation. Operate SAM through collaborative, transparent framework, incorporating input from MS, UN bodies, and key knowledge brokers. Having a staff capable of articulating policymakers' evidentiary needs is critical.

### **> Increase Effective Stakeholder Inclusivity**

Broaden the SAM's inclusivity by meaningfully incorporating diverse input from civil society, academia, and indigenous groups. Develop clear guidelines for stakeholder engagement, ensuring equitable participation and representation in scientific consultations. Prioritise the integration of Global South perspectives to create a more balanced, representative SA framework.

### **> Promote Transparency and Accountability**

Enhance the credibility of SA by instituting transparent procedures, and clear guidelines for evidence use. Establish a feedback reporting mechanism to track SA's impact and ensure alignment with UNGA priorities. Implement a monitoring system to track and evaluate the follow-through of SA recommendations in UNGA's policy initiatives.