

IOC Officers' meeting 20-21 January 2026

Background paper

Ensuring greater effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness in the governance of the Commission: review of the working methods of IOC Governing Bodies

1. Context and guidance: IOC Assembly decision, and the UN80 initiative

The purpose of this paper is to inspire discussion among officers about ways of improving effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness of IOC governance processes.

The background is this decision of the 33rd Session of the IOC Assembly:

“Requests the IOC Executive Secretary, in consultation with the Officers and IFAG, to review the working methods of the IOC Governing Bodies, in order to ensure greater effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness in the governance of the Commission, and to present to the IOC Executive Council at its 59th session concrete recommendations that could be implemented at the 34th session of the IOC Assembly;”

The decision originated from a proposal by Canada. It was motivated by a recognition that the IOC governance as a whole is heavy on procedure, that Assembly and other IOC governance meetings can be made more strategic and substantive, that the reinforced autonomy will reduce UNESCO-related workload and that the new results framework provides an opportunity to focus our governance processes on our strategic objectives.

The request is to ensure more effective, efficient and inclusive governance of the Commission. Effectiveness is measured by the extent to which we reach our objectives. Efficiency means achieving those objectives with the least possible use of resources. The current financial situation of the IOC adds to the imperative of using resources more efficiently.

Inclusiveness means several things: i) engaging Member States more frequently between sessions of formal governance meetings (such as more IFAG meetings); ii) seeking to involve more Member States from more electoral groups in the governance discussions (such as by moving subsidiary body meetings up front in our planning cycles); and (iii) engaging Member States more meaningfully during governing body sessions to allow for real strategic dialogue.

On this latter point, discussions in the Finance Committee (and in corridors with Member States and observers) highlighted a range of issues that we should reflect on – Secretariat presentations that are too numerous and that don't raise issues for discussion but only report on activities, documentation that is too late to allow for Member State analyses and reflection, overly long sessions especially at the Assembly, reporting from some TSBs that is too detailed and too process orientated leading to overly long and process oriented decisions. On the question of Secretariat presentations, the example of IMO meetings was cited where documentation is provided, it is assumed that MS have read and reflected on the

documents and thus there is no presentation of the material with the session going directly to MS interventions. This may not be the model that we want to follow but it demonstrates there are different ways of doing things.

The analysis and proposals emerging from the UN80 process can also provide guidance to our deliberations. The UN80 initiative is the United Nations' ambitious, system-wide reform effort to respond to a vital question: **'How can the UN adapt to become more agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges amid tightening resources?'**

The Initiative aims to use finite resources as effectively as possible, and with fewer bureaucratic burdens. Some specific recommendations from the Mandate review are listed below and include several that align with reflections of our Member States:

- Reduce the volume of text of decisions, in order to provide more clarity, effective implementation and greater impact.
- Frame decisions/mandates in a way which allows flexibility for the executive to organize the work based on comparative advantages and resources
- Refrain from mandating new tasks which are not backed by resources or an explicit reduction in other tasks.
- Prioritize and streamline requests for reports, working groups or meetings
- Provide shorter reports and reduce maximum word counts

2. More effective and efficient governance

Effectiveness relates to attainment of our objectives. The starting point, therefore, is how governance processes including meetings can support the objectives set in the Medium-Term Strategy:

- 1. Healthy Ocean and Sustained Ocean Ecosystem Services**
- 2. Effective Warning Systems and Preparedness for Tsunamis and Other Ocean-Related Hazards**
- 3. Resilience to Climate Change and Contribution to its Mitigation**
- 4. Scientifically Founded Services for the Sustainable Ocean Economy**
- 5. Foresight on Emerging Ocean Science Issues**

Proposals for consideration (not all mutually exclusive):

Governing Body Meetings

- Design agendas of the Assembly, Executive Council and Regional / Technical Subsidiary Bodies to focus on the Results Framework i.e. objectives, the progress made in achieving them, future perspectives and directions that are proposed, with a focus on decisions that need to be taken, as well as obstacles that must be overcome.
- Limit Executive Council and Assembly meetings to 5 days within one working week
- Make better use of the ½ day meeting of the Executive Council immediately preceding the Assembly so that it is more strategic and less procedural

- Clear process for deciding when reporting from Subsidiary Bodies requires a separate agenda item (i.e. because the Governing Bodies need to take a substantive decision based on recommendations from SBs) and when reporting can be solely in the form of written reports
- Clearer guidance for formulating of decisions to avoid requirements for “over-reporting” on issues when not required e.g. to both Executive Council and Assembly
- Redesign reports (written and oral) of subsidiary bodies and the Secretariat accordingly, to be focused on the real issues
- Record Member State oral interventions only in digital format (whether in sound or in writing).
- Reduce the length of presentations or delete them altogether for some or all agenda items (e.g. where there is no decision and the presentation is repeating the contents of a written report).

Regional and Technical Subsidiary Bodies

- Co-design guidelines for Subsidiary Bodies on their role including: (i) making decisions related only to their areas of competence (i.e. cannot take decisions that affect other Subsidiary Bodies or the EC/Assembly); and (ii) making recommendations to the Governing Bodies that has impact on budget or other bodies outside their area of competence
- Provide guidance on the ‘transition phase’ of the timing of subsidiary body meetings in 2026 including required outcomes, implications for electoral cycles and options for running these meetings (e.g. online meetings)
- Formally remind Member States of their obligation to pay for travel and accommodation for representations at Governing Body meetings (including Regional Subsidiary Bodies)
- Organise subsidiary body meetings in digital format unless travel and accommodation costs are covered by donor governments, participants or dedicated extra-budgetary resources that have been secured for this purpose.

Resolutions, Decisions and Reports

- Introduce a way of assessing in quantitative terms the staff time and cost implications prior to the taking of decisions, including establishment of working groups or requests for reports i.e. make a ‘financial, programmatic, and administrative considerations’ section mandatory and to be completed with quantitative data for all decisions. If we don’t know how much it is going to cost we shouldn’t be proposing it.
- Highlight more clearly in working documents the purpose and rationale for draft decisions.
- Centralised review (and editing) of decision texts before they are published to check for succinctness, relevance, approaches that allow flexibility for Secretariat execution etc.
- Require reports to reference the Results Framework and show clearly how activities are contributing to objectives and targets
- Introduce word count limits for all written reports (using addendums where necessary for additional information) and ensure deadlines are met.

Sub-Groups (Working Groups, Expert Groups, Committees etc.)

- Stricter criteria (in addition to financial criteria mentioned above) for establishment of working groups and intersessional task teams – avoid ‘we won’t take a decision we will have a working group look at it’ as the default – while this is sometimes the best option it is arguably overly used as a response to taking a decision which in itself is often a result of poorly drafted decisions / inadequate preparation
- Reduce the number of currently existing sub-groups (e.g. working groups, expert groups, committees etc.)– amounting to 156 groups - across the IOC

3. More inclusive governance

The IOC is marked by close collaboration between Member States, and between Member States and the Secretariat. The Regional Sub-Commissions help ensure opportunities for Member State engagement. We should nevertheless seek a broader engagement by more Member States in governance discussions.

Proposals for consideration (not all mutually exclusive):

- Systematically organize online information sessions before Governing Body meetings to help Member States prepare for the discussions
- More focused and co-designed agendas and decisions proposals, and reducing the volume of paper, will benefit Member States with less capacity to prepare for meetings.
- Timely preparation of technical and regional subsidiary body meetings and clear processes for validation at HQ level of agendas and documentation, including budget implications
- The changed sequencing of subsidiary body meetings will provide better opportunities for Member State stakeholders to give impactful input to IOC planning of programme and budget
- Ensure that all RSBs have a correct and up to date list of national IOC Focal Points, ask for new nominations where needed and ensure that it is the Focal Point or a formally delegated individual that attends the RSB
- Develop procedures to automate / streamline updating and maintenance of information on National Focal Points
- Provide capacity development / information on the role of Technical and Regional Subsidiary Bodies including the expected outcomes and links to IOC planning and budget
- Streamline governance of Technical Subsidiary Bodies where needed to reduce layers and processes and avoid creating new governance structures where possible.
- More regular engagement with Officers and with Chairs / Co-Chairs of RSBs and charge and empower these individuals to convene and consult with their electoral groups on important issues and decisions in the lead up to RSBs and other key moments
- Ensuring resources for translation / interpretation for all RSB meetings in relevant languages
- Identify schedules/dates and host counties for RSBs at least 12 months in advance to allow for financial planning by Member States
- More regular and substantive online meetings with Member States, IFAG or otherwise, can over time ensure increased engagement from more regions.