

European Members of the International Council for Science ICSU Perspectives on and strategy proposals for the proposed ICSU-ISSC merger

Introductory note

The European ICSU Members are, in principle, supportive of the proposal for a merger between ICSU and ISSC, although individual members may have reservations on specific issues, which they will communicate separately. The intention of this paper is to make suggestions about the rationale, purpose and strategic priorities for a merged organisation, with the objective to set the frame for the merged organisation, referred to as ICSU/ISSC from here. Our input here is intended to assist ICSU/ISSC in achieving its ambition of being “the international voice of science”. We do not address other important issues of detail, because they are dealt with in part in the Draft Planning Framework document of July 2016, but we ask that consideration be urgently given to financial and membership issues.

1. Rationale and Purpose

The European ICSU Members ask that the arguments and options that led to the proposal for a merger, rather than a pilot phase of closer association, be set out at or ideally before the extraordinary General Assembly on 24 October 2016. In the interim, we herewith offer our rationale and two principal reasons why we view the merger of ICSU with ISSC as the preferred route: first, we concur with the Draft Planning Framework that few, if any, of the global issues that science is increasingly asked to address lie wholly in the domain of either the natural or the social sciences, often requiring expertise from medical and engineering science and technology as well as the humanities. Because it has often proved to be inadequate for one group to frame an issue and only then invite collaboration from the other, joint framing is a vital prerequisite in the search for effective answers. Second, the international landscape of top-level science representation is complex and confusing to many scientists as well as policymakers and stakeholders that we wish to influence, and moves towards one umbrella organisation would therefore increase the lever of science.

An ICSU/ISSC with a sufficiently differentiated view of the perspectives, skills and modes of work of its cross-disciplinary membership could effectively draw on that collective knowledge to frame, plan, execute and evaluate global science programmes of inquiry or scientific advice in the most effective and efficient way. This being said, it is important that there be no perceived dilution of academic rigour and that all disciplines feel they enjoy “parity of esteem” in the new structure. In return, ICSU/ISSC could create major opportunities for its members to headline their science at the highest level internationally, to engage their scientists and benefit their science through contribution to major global policy issues and to create transdisciplinary activities that offer opportunities for new knowledge. The challenge for ICSU/ISSC National and Union Members is both to stimulate and to exploit such activities. At the same time, the portfolio of selected activities should be focused enough to allow in-depth approaches that create substantive additional value in the specific niche of ICSU/ISSC. Within this framework we see three major, distinctive priorities for ICSU/ISSC.

2. Strategic Priorities

- “Science for Policy”: Communicate advice pro-actively in projecting new scientific understanding and awareness to the highest international political levels and reactively contributes a scientific perspective that has rigour, credibility and relevance to matters of international concern. ICSU already has important pathways through its formal role in the UN system and its involvement in bodies such as the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), whose efficient use ICSU/ISSC prioritises. In that regard, the diplomacy approach already conducted is complemented with short and concise statements and recommendations on current global policy issues;
- “Policy for Science”: Address emerging policy for science issues, advocate freedom and responsibility aspects and promote international equity of science. The priorities and organisation of science continually change in ways that require adaptation in terms of how scientists and science systems work, in terms of evaluation and dissemination of scientific results and in terms of demands that society places on scientists. ICSU/ISSC is positioned to identify such issues for uptake in robust international frameworks, for example Science International, on proposed issues such as “impact of research assessments on scientific quality/integrity”, “big data”, “science education” and “transdisciplinarity”. The traditional role of ICSU and ISSC as defenders of the right of scientists to freely associate and cooperate must be retained and strengthened in the new organisation;

- “Global Science Programmes”: Identify challenges of global pertinence to stimulate transdisciplinary research and influence international public policy. Bundling the natural and social science communities around these topics and bringing them together with other stakeholders, funding agencies in particular, is a prime role to that effect. This coordinating and agenda setting role is crucial, but a review of the experience with Future Earth is necessary in view of ICSU/ISSC engagement beyond the initiation phase of global initiatives and an optimal use of the available human resources.

3. Organisational Matters

- Governance structure: Strengthen the role of Committee on Scientific Planning and Review (CSPR) and the Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in the conduct of Science (CFRS) as advisory bodies vis-à-vis the Executive Board and, accordingly, review the size of the Executive Board;
- Committee on Scientific Planning and Review: Engage CSPR in regular horizon scanning of work done by National and Union Members in the sense of foresighting to take up issues to the global level through “Global Science Programmes”;
- Global Secretariat: Dedicate personnel to serve as access points for the ICSU/ISSC membership, to support CSPR’s and CFRS’s work and strengthen their links with the Executive Board, to serve as gateway for global policy bodies looking for scientific advice and to foster interaction with the Regional Offices.

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