

A letter from the President and President-elect to the Members of the ISC

8 APRIL 2025

Dear Members,

We are writing to you when many of you are looking to the International Science Council for guidance on responses to global challenges to science.

It is only a decade since the Sustainable Development Goals were launched, the Sendai Framework agreed, and the Paris climate accord reached. In the early years of this last decade we saw a remarkable growth in global scientific collaboration, a growing focus on the issues affecting the global commons, an increasing contribution of science from less developed and emerging countries, a far greater diversity within the research community, enhanced moves to open science and open data, and the emergence of transdisciplinary research bringing the natural and social sciences and other forms of knowledge closer together. There was a sense that while there were many challenges, scientists across the world could work with governments, foundations, business and societies to tackle these urgent issues, especially those of the global commons.

In one sense the COVID-19 pandemic was a demonstration of what could be done but it also accelerated perceptual change. The previous investments in life sciences had allowed for remarkable and unprecedented cooperation to develop new effective class of vaccine. But on the other hand it increased tensions between the major technopoles, there was discord between the global north and south related to technology and intellectual property, the multilateral system was seen by some to have been ineffective or politicized, and in some countries, science became a political tool and the tension between science as a source of knowledge and a tool of power became obvious. COVID had financial and social consequences that are still playing out.

But even before COVID came, we had seen the emergence of the so-called ‘post-truth era’. Trust in many of the institutions of society had declined. Rapid sociological, demographic, geopolitical, environmental and technological change was unsettling. Dissatisfaction was fueled by many unresolved issues and growing inequalities in many societies.

The changed information environment with the explosion of social media did not help and allowed people to reinforce their biases and ignore inconvenient evidence. It has fueled the transmission of

The International Science Council (ISC) is a non-governmental organization with a uniquely diverse membership that brings together around 250 science organizations across the globe.

disinformation and conspiracy theories. These have helped undermine the capacity of societies to use scientific knowledge well. It altered public decision making. The pandemic further fueled the populist turn impacting on the role of science. For at its heart, populism rejects organized science from having any privilege in defining truths and from having any privilege in decision making.

As the geopolitical landscape has changed, countries are now rapidly shifting resources to support defense and security. This shift, combined with the economic challenges that flow from the pandemic, from emerging tariff barriers and a retreat from globalization, may drive countries to be less committed to funding the needed global efforts, because they are now focused more on their own more utilitarian needs. In this context international science cooperation has been put at a greater risk.

At the same time and driven by the same factors, we have seen a growing assault on science, universities and academic freedom, not only in one country or in one continent. Sadly, much of that attack is on the issues and science that matters most: climate change, pandemic risks, social science, environmental sustainability, natural capital and more. These are the very domains which are most relevant for society and the global challenges. There has been a growing rejection of evidence in informing policy in some countries.

The global support for international science cooperation has been shifting. Science is defined by its principles, principles that make it a universal language. And science is needed to address so many of the issues we face at every level from local to global. It is critically important at this time that the science community comes together and does not let short-termism and nationalism get in the way of providing the evidence to address those issues that will determine our future on this planet.

The International Science Council is the most comprehensive international science organization and unique in its composition and mission. Its priorities must be shaped by this changing milieu.

Firstly, while the multilateral system may be weakened, it remains the only structure by which global policies can be influenced and effected. Over the past two years the ISC has been investing to ensure that the voice of the global science community can better assist both the policy and technical agencies in using science in these challenging and urgent times. A critical part of this is helping to shape the global research agenda. We will continue to expand our efforts here – it must be a core priority.

Secondly, as an organization uniquely placed because of our global membership to play a role in informal or so-called track 2 science diplomacy where science helps promote peaceful dialogue between countries, we are working with other partners to try and promote science as a global public good and where possible, as a way to reduce tensions. We need to renew our efforts for countries

to understand that it is in the direct national interests to support urgent action on the issues of the global commons.

Thirdly, the importance of promoting international science cooperation remains, both because the world needs it and because it is a glue to help keep the world from fracturing further. We are doing so in multiple ways: promoting the values and principles that allow scientists to cooperate across cultures and contexts, defending open science, and supporting our Affiliated Bodies who play such a critical role in the organization and coordination of international science. Some of these now face real challenges because of recent events and this changed milieu and the ISC is working to help protect and develop them. We will be making further internal changes to be more effective in these roles. Our expanded platform of regional offices is a further step we have taken to promote regional cooperation.

Fourthly, we must reexamine the social contract for science and recognize that greater efforts are needed to protect trust in science and for it to be perceived as trustworthy. There are gaps in the normative framework for scientific research that must be addressed, and we need to better understand why scientific knowledge can be rejected rather than used.

And in that context, we must be clear: science has a unique and critical capacity to give knowledge about our world. As a universal knowledge system, we know that science can contribute so much to finding a safer and better path for all of us on this planet and protect the planet's biota. We have a responsibility to focus on where we can make a difference.

Addressing the worrying and multifaceted named above issues is a complex and sensitive agenda for a small international organization, even with our extensive and influential membership. But we must. For we are uniquely placed and therefore have large responsibilities. How we do so, must be nuanced and principled. Our membership in every country and across every scientific discipline gives us a unique asset. But the ISC will be most effective when every eligible scientific organization becomes a member.

Like other parts of the science system, we are resource limited so we must prioritize. Protecting global science for the global public good, enabling international science cooperation, using our capacities to assist the vulnerable international system and promoting diplomacy towards a better planet must be our primary goals. This sharpens our strategic framework even more than we suggested in Oman.

Clearly, the ISC's effectiveness would be enhanced by access to more resources. We hope, even in these difficult times, that donor countries, foundations or private donors can see the value of what



the ISC is doing. In the meantime, we will be undertaking internal change to focus on the highest priority tasks.

While the ISC is uniquely placed, it has a unique burden. These are very challenging times for international science. It is critical that we find ways to be more effective. We are confident we are on the right path to do so.



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