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**IOC AND THE FUTURE OF THE OCEAN: RESULTS OF PHASE II CONSULTATION
AND PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR PHASE III CONSULTATION**

Summary

This document summarizes the results of Phase 2 of the 'IOC and the Future of the Ocean' consultation process that was launched following a decision of the IOC Assembly in 2023. This process, which is being undertaken in three phases, is being implemented to make recommendations on how the IOC can better support Member States and stakeholders in three interconnected areas: (i) science-based sustainable ocean planning; (ii) ocean science support to global environmental conventions and frameworks; and (iii) the development of a sustainable ocean economy.

This document presents an overview of the extent to which the existing ecosystem of partners working in ocean science responds to identified Member State needs, and where gaps persist that could be effectively filled by the IOC. The document also outlines an approach to the third and final phase of the consultation process that will be undertaken for presentation to the 34th Session of the IOC Assembly.

Introduction

1. The 'IOC and the Future of the Ocean' consultation process was launched following a mandate from the IOC Assembly at its 32nd session (June 2023), which called for a structured consultation on how the IOC can better support Member States and stakeholders in three interconnected areas: (i) science-based sustainable ocean planning; (ii) ocean science support to global environmental conventions and frameworks; and (iii) the development of a sustainable ocean economy. The consultation process is structured across three phases:

- **Phase 1 (Demand Side Assessment):** Assessment of Member State needs, completed and presented to the 33rd IOC Assembly (June 2025).
- **Phase 2 (Supply Side Assessment):** Mapping and analysis of the current ecosystem of actors, programmes, and mechanisms responding to those needs and preliminary identification of the unique niche that IOC could fill (current phase).
- **Phase 3 (Optimal IOC Role):** Development of concrete recommendations on IOC's future strategic role and an evaluation of the associated resourcing and partnership requirements, to inform the programme and budget for the 2028–2029 biennium and the next Medium-Term Strategy (June 2027).

2. This document provides a summary of the Phase 2 findings, focusing on how well the existing global and regional ecosystem responds to identified Member State needs, and where gaps persist.

3. As referenced at the 33rd session of the IOC Assembly (July 2025), the Future of the Ocean process—while preceding to the [UN80 initiative](#)—will be relevant in informing Member States as regards ocean cooperation within the UN system.

Methodological Approach

4. Phase 2 of the consultation process combined global data analysis with regional consultations to develop a deeper understanding of where Member State priority needs are already being supported most extensively by partner organizations, where there are gaps in support, and thus, where IOC interventions may be most strategic.

5. Based on the priorities identified through Member State discussions during Phase 1 of the consultation process (refer Table 1), a review of major databases of ocean-related activity, including the database of over 1,000 programmes and projects endorsed as part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), was carried out. This led to a first mapping of the levels of partner support in terms of projects and programmes that exist at the global and regional levels for Member State identified priorities, and the identification of those priority areas that are relatively underserved.

6. The analysis also included a review of established regional governance frameworks (e.g. Regional Seas programmes) and the extent to which these are effectively addressing issues such as pollution, biodiversity, and coastal management and demonstrate the benefits of regional collaboration; national institutions that have strong technical capacity and that hold important long term time series datasets; and examples of initiatives such as existing observation systems (e.g. GOOS-related initiatives) that show that sustained cooperation is possible.

7. The analysis was discussed and refined through online workshops with Member States in the IOC Regional Sub-Commissions and further supplemented by bilateral consultations with IOC Officers and key stakeholders. The analysis will be further refined by the coming edition of the 'Global Ocean Science Report'.

Table 1: Summary of Member State priorities emerging from Phase 1

	Sustainable Ocean Planning	UN conventions	Sustainable Ocean Economy	Count
Fragmented science policy interface	X	X	X	3
Capacity building	X	X	X	3
Equity	X	X	X	3
Biological oceanography	X	X	X	3
Ocean-hazard preparedness	X		X	2
Research support	X	X		2
Marine Spatial Planning		X	X	2
Ocean data repositories	X			1
Early warning and risk reduction	X			1
Physical oceanography	X			1
Ocean data collection		X	X	2
Marine pollution		X		1
Eutrophication and HABS			X	1

Key Findings

8. The analysis indicated significant differences in the degree to which partner organizations are currently providing support for the priority areas identified by IOC Member States. While some priority areas such as marine biodiversity, ocean-climate solutions, and pollution appear to be relatively well supported by partners, areas requiring long-term technical support and investment, infrastructure, and coordination—such as observation and data systems and planning tools—are generally relatively underrepresented in terms of support.

9. At a global level, the priority areas that have relatively less support include many that are directly relevant to IOC's mandate and that are part of its current programmatic work, indicating that IOC's current programmatic priorities are filling a unique niche that is not served by other partners. These less supported priority areas that align with IOC's mandate include:

- (i) **Sustainable Ocean Planning:** There is a clear demand for integrated, adaptive planning approaches that build on IOC's substantial experience in marine spatial planning to include monitoring, feedback, and iterative decision-making.
- (ii) **Data, Observations, and Infrastructure:** Long-term observing systems, accessible time-series datasets, and data stewardship remain foundational but under-supported. These are essential for evidence-based policy but require sustained investment models.
- (iii) **Science-to-Policy Uptake & Application:** A persistent gap exists between data generation and tools and capacity to facilitate practical uptake and application. Member States require decision-support tools, risk assessments, and operational services rather than raw data alone, including for example in multi-hazard early warning systems.
- (iv) **Capacity Development for Data and Science:** Capacity constraints remain central, particularly for developing countries, small island developing States (SIDS), and under-resourced regions. Issues include access to data, technical capabilities to apply data and science, and participation in global processes including emerging needs to fulfil national obligations as part of the BBNJ Agreement.

- (v) **Ocean science literacy for policymakers:** Awareness of the value and necessity of ocean science to inform national decision-making and policy development remains uneven across many Member States. While IOC focal points—typically representing technical institutions—generally demonstrate a strong understanding of these issues, this is not always reflected across other parts of national administrations. In particular, there are persistent gaps among entities that would benefit from, or hold decision-making authority over, investment in ocean science.

10. The regional consultations built on the global analysis and highlighted both commonalities and specific priority areas where IOC has the potential to play a unique added value role at the regional level. The potential for IOC to play a stronger regional convening role amongst Member States was highlighted in all the regional consultations, as was the added value that could be generated by increased awareness amongst Member States and regional organizations of the economic and societal benefits of investing in ocean science. All regional consultations also highlighted that IOC could play a potentially unique role as a broker to access more sustainable climate and development finance to fulfill regional priorities. Additional specific issues that were raised by the Regional Sub-Commissions included:

- (i) **IOCAFRICA** (Sub-Commission for Africa and the Adjacent Island States): support for knowledge and tools to address coastal erosion and coastal resilience, sustainable ocean planning to support the development of sustainable ocean-based economies, and enhancement of institutional capacity including targeted and regionally specific capacity development in science to policy tools and approaches, and support for ocean literacy of policy makers.
- (ii) **WESTPAC** (Sub-Commission for the Western Pacific): coordination of a regional data and observation strategy, support for regional data centres, linking real-time observations to applications and services, and inclusive participation across diverse national contexts.
- (iii) **IOCINDIO** (Sub-Commission for the Central Indian Ocean): support for sustainable ocean planning incorporating disaster risk reduction considerations, support to fill gaps in monitoring coverage and coordination, particularly in under-served areas, integration of capacity development and technology transfer across thematic priorities, and support to real-time observation systems and regional data-sharing standards.
- (iv) **IOCARIBE** (Sub-Commission for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions): support for improved access of Member States to global datasets, knowledge and tools to offset the impacts of pollutants—including sargassum, stronger integration of land-sea interactions, and support for small island developing States (SIDS) including facilitation of SIDS-SIDS exchange and learning.

Conclusion

11. Phase 2 of the 'IOC and Future of the Ocean' confirmed that while an extensive ecosystem of partners is supporting Member States in global ocean science and policy, it remains fragmented and uneven in its ability to meet their priority needs. It also confirms that for some priorities there is still a need for further support despite the existence of significant project and programme support.

12. The consultations indicated a general view that IOC is uniquely positioned to meet many of the most under-served needs of Member States, specifically by acting as a science–policy bridge, translating ocean science into actionable guidance, tools, and providing a convening and cooperation framework for Member States at the global and regional scales.

13. The consultations further revealed the strong view that the IOC mandate and most of its current programmatic initiatives align strongly with underserved priority areas for Member States.

The specific areas that were identified through the consultations where IOC can add the most value include:

- (i) stewardship of global observing systems and data infrastructure including standard and policy setting;
- (ii) development of policy-relevant tools for sustainable ocean planning;
- (iii) strengthening integrated and multi-hazard early warning and risk reduction systems;
- (iv) capacity development and ocean literacy, particularly for policymakers;
- (v) support for emerging governance frameworks (e.g. BBNJ); and
- (vi) facilitation of regional coordination and delivery.

14. The Phase 2 consultations also revealed a strong call for IOC to focus on further prioritization of its areas of engagement, stronger links between global and regional programmes, and strengthening the operational feasibility of its interventions (e.g. ensuring adequate resources and partnerships) rather than redefining its thematic areas of engagement. This includes:

- (i) enhanced efforts in regional delivery by strengthening Regional Sub-Commissions and regional mechanisms as primary delivery platforms;
- (ii) the need to more actively explore opportunities to access additional finance and investment by building stronger links to climate funds, development banks, and philanthropic and other funding sources;
- (iii) operational impact by focusing on visible, practical outputs that demonstrate value to Member State;
- (iv) and engagement by enhancing participation through language accessibility and capacity support.

15. The consultations also noted a range of structural weaknesses that should be addressed to allow IOC to deliver support to Member States as effectively as possible including:

- (i) weak linkages between global frameworks, regional bodies, and national implementation;
- (ii) insufficient access to sustained financing, particularly for long-term observing systems and infrastructure, with a pronounced structural mismatch between available funding (often short-term and project-based) and the long-term nature of ocean systems and infrastructure needs;
- (iii) limited translation of scientific outputs into usable, policy-relevant tools and services;
- (iv) uneven regional capacity, with particular challenges in Africa, parts of Asia, and small island contexts; and
- (v) practical barriers to participation, including language, institutional capacity, and access to data.

Proposed Approach to Phase 3 Consultation

16. Phase 3 of the Future of the Ocean Consultation will combine insights from Phase 1 and 2 to develop a set of IOC priorities to underpin the programme and budget for the 2028–2029 biennium and the next Medium-Term Strategy (June 2027). It will begin in June 2026, following discussion and input from the Executive Council, and be presented to the IOC Assembly at its 34th Session in June 2027.

17. It will include in depth discussions with potential financial partners to assess the resources available to fund the priorities identified as both critical and underserved in Phases 1 and 2. It will also explore in more depth into IOC's own strengths and capacity to fill gaps identified in Phases 1 and 2 and build on Member State reflections of how IOC can strengthen its offer.

18. The output will be a set of draft recommendations reflecting Member State priorities, IOC's own analysis on the criticality of specific priorities to meet its core strategic goals and IOC's unique value added relative to other partners.