



Guidance on responsibilities and ways of working in the biodiversity expert groups

Source: BDC 24/12/01, Annex 15

OSPAR Agreement 2024-08

Background

1. Biodiversity expert groups are an informal means of bringing together expertise from OSPAR Contracting Parties on specific topics enabling Contracting Parties to share information and expertise, and collaborate on common goals. Expert groups can comprise national experts from a wide range of backgrounds including academic institutions, government bodies, and observer organisations. This provides an opportunity to combine pure and applied scientific expertise to provide robust outputs that are relevant to current conservation policy across all parts of the North-East Atlantic.

2. Most of the current biodiversity expert groups have been in place since the OSPAR workshop on MSFD biodiversity descriptors in Amsterdam in 2011. Since then, ICG-COBAM has been responsible for coordinating the work of the expert groups and maintaining an overview of resource requirements in relation to the planned work programme. A list of the expert groups and their leads is provided in the terms of reference for ICG-COBAM which are agreed annually by BDC.

3. Biodiversity expert groups were instrumental in helping OSPAR 2013 adopt a first tranche of biodiversity common indicators. The expert groups continued to develop the indicators and produced the first assessments of 17 biodiversity common indicators and NIS in the Intermediate Assessment 2017. Six years later, 19 biodiversity common indicators were included in the Quality Status Report 2023 (QSR 2023), as well as 9 pilot assessments of candidate indicators. QSR 2023 for the first time included integrated assessments of the ecosystem components to assess if good environmental status had been achieved at an OSPAR regional scale. Biodiversity expert groups, in some cases supported through EU projects,) were essential for developing methods for combining the assessment results at indicator level.

Purpose of this document

4. This document aims to provide overall guidance on the roles of biodiversity expert groups and their ways of working. There are no specific rules on expert groups set out in the OSPAR Rules of Procedure (OSPAR Agreement 2013-02) but expert groups are expected to operate in a way that is consistent with the working of all OSPAR subsidiary bodies and the [Code of conduct at OSPAR Commission's meetings](#)¹. The OSPAR Rules of Procedure, in particular those relating to subsidiary bodies, take precedence over this guidance where any questions of interpretation arise.

¹ https://www.ospar.org/site/assets/files/1291/code_of_conduct.pdf.

Role of ICG-COBAM and BDC in relation to the expert groups

5. As the responsible OSPAR subsidiary body for ICG-COBAM, the Biodiversity Committee (BDC) has overall responsibility for the functioning of ICG-COBAM and the expert groups. References to ICG-COBAM in the following guidance should be understood as also referring to BDC.
6. ICG-COBAM's role is to keep an overview of resource requirements in the expert groups in relation to the planned work programme and to ensure alignment with the requirements of the wider OSPAR reporting and assessment activities. ICG-COBAM also brings together expertise and experience from within the different expert groups and provides a forum for sharing transferable knowledge to discuss and harmonise approaches and methods to an appropriate degree.
7. To ensure that ICG-COBAM is in a position to deliver its tasks, Contracting Parties are requested to:
 - (i) support an active national engagement in the relevant expert groups and ICG-COBAM through ensuring dedicated expert time to contribute to work and providing resources to attend workshops and meetings and carry out related work, which as a guide would equate to a minimum of 2 weeks per expert per year;
 - ii) support experts' work to develop monitoring and assessment methods that are to the benefit of all parties, and;
 - iii) facilitate the required data flows for indicator development and assessments.
8. It is the responsibility of ICG-COBAM delegates to ensure that national experts are sufficiently briefed as to the scope of their remit and the level of commitment that is expected to be contributed to the expert group work.

Summary of the responsibilities of the expert groups

9. The purpose of the expert groups is to engage experts from relevant Contracting Parties to provide expert knowledge and guidance on:
 - a. the development process for indicators and integrated assessment methods,
 - b. the preparation of assessments to ensure the results are as robust and widely applicable as possible,
 - c. data specifications, relating to their expert area, in accordance with OSPAR data management processes (Management of OSPAR data (OSPAR Agreement 2024-03)), and
 - d. other relevant areas of OSPAR's work, such as guiding the development of programmes and measures (e.g. regional action plans).
10. The expert groups work within the overall framework of the terms of reference for ICG-COBAM which are renewed annually by OSPAR's Biodiversity Committee (BDC). Additional requests for support or advice may come from other intersessional correspondence groups under BDC, such as advice on assessment of threatened and declining species from ICG-POSH, and from other OSPAR bodies, such as EIHA, HASEC or WG-COCOA.
11. As required the expert groups can develop multi-year plans to manage their work which are presented to and endorsed by ICG-COBAM and constitute supporting documents to the ICG-COBAM terms of reference agreed annually by BDC. These can include updating existing plans such as the multi-

year plan previously agreed within OBHEG. The joint expert groups on birds and NIS already have work plans that are renewed and agreed every 3 years as part of OSPAR's joint working arrangements with HELCOM and ICES². Other groups could adopt a similar format.

12. Each expert group maps out the state of development for each of the common and candidate indicators.

13. A list of indicators identifying the mechanism for taking forward their development is maintained by the Secretariat and ICG-COBAM Convenors and an updated version uploaded to SharePoint.

Ways of working in the expert groups

Group membership

14. Membership of the expert groups is open to experts nominated by Contracting Parties and Observers. Members are welcome from a wide range of backgrounds, including government bodies, academic institutions and NGOs. Each expert group member is nominated to the Secretariat and Expert Group lead by a Contracting Party or observer organization. The expert group lead maintains on sharepoint the list of experts nominated to the group, including respective role of members in a folder that is locked for the expert group lead, Secretariat and ICG-COBAM convenors.

15. Members of the expert groups are encouraged to participate in and support all the expert group's activities.

16. Participation of observer organisations follows the Criteria and Procedures Governing Observership of Non-Governmental Organisations at Meetings within the framework of the OSPAR Commission at Annex 2 of the OSPAR Rules of Procedure.

Expert Group Leads

17. Expert group leads convene the work of the group to ensure that the group's activities meet the needs set out in the ICG-COBAM terms of reference and any additional tasks from other Committees and ICGs agreed to be referred to the group by [ICG-COBAM/BDC]. Their role is to convene in a neutral way, to facilitate discussion and identify common approaches or methods among the expert group participants.

18. All group members have a responsibility for sharing the work associated with the expert group's tasks. This should not all be left to the expert group or leads. Contracting Parties support each of their nominated group members to ensure this. This is an important part of ensuring that the results from each group are as widely applicable as possible.

19. Contracting Parties collectively ensure that one or more experts have the resources to lead each expert group. Expert group leads should be nominated to ICG-COBAM, and identified in ICG-COBAM ToR by BDC.

20. Contracting Parties coordinate through ICG-COBAM to rotate expert group leaderships among them, to share the resource burden and to maintain an equitable geographical and gender representation.

² See ICG-COBAM Terms of Reference

21. In line with the general OSPAR rules of procedure, expert group leads should be able to serve a two-year term with the possibility of serving a second two-year term if nominated, recognising the advantages of continuity in the work. As a general rule expert group leads are not expected to serve for more than 4 years. Recognising the advantages of continuity in the work, there can be exceptions to this where the expert, Contracting Party and Expert Group agrees.

22. Expert groups leads report to the meetings of ICG-COBAM on the progress being made by the expert group.

Meetings of the Expert Group

23. In accordance with the guidance agreed by HOD(2) 2021³ the presumption is that Expert Groups meet online. This does not rule out the possibility of arranging a face-to-face meeting if this is considered necessary for the issues to be discussed and is feasible. The number of any such physical meetings of expert groups is not more than one face-to-face meeting a year noting that this is also the guidance given to working groups and ICGs. The possibility of virtual attendance should be provided for any physical meetings as far as possible in order to allow those who are not able to travel to participate.

Indicator leads

24. Contracting Parties coordinate through ICG-COBAM and the expert groups to ensure there is at least one lead Contracting Party for the work on each indicator to develop monitoring and data needs and develop and implement the assessment method.

25. Ideally, Common Indicator leads are supported by an expert from a Contracting Party in each region where the indicator is adopted. This shares the burden between experts and provides region-specific insight to guide and support the application of the indicator within each region. Members of an expert group should support the indicator leads to ensure that the burden of work is shared

26. Mechanisms for leading indicators can be flexible and may include:

- a. Acting as a facilitator of a common or candidate indicator;
- b. Delivery through national or international projects, including as necessary requests for advice to ICES via the annual OSPAR-ICES work programme;
- c. taking forward work by a nominated lead expert within the relevant expert group(s).

27. Where no lead Contracting Party has been identified, the indicator development should continue within the relevant expert group. But without an identified lead and targeted support by Contracting Parties, an indicator is unlikely to further develop.

SharePoint

28. The expert groups use SharePoint to support their work. The Secretariat supports the operation of SharePoint. Participants in the expert groups should contact the Secretariat for access to the SharePoint and further support, for example setting up Expert Group folders.

³ HOD(2) 21/8/1, Annex 3