



GUIDANCE NOTE

Engaging with
Intergovernmental
Organisations/UN
Agencies

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It was written and produced with input from the **Geneva Science Policy Interface** (GSPI)

UCL GUIDANCE NOTE

Engaging with International Organisations/UN Agencies



Why engage with Intergovernmental Organisations/UN Agencies?

The United Nations (UN) provides the international arena where a wide range of global policy issues are discussed and addressed, ranging from human rights to climate change, from health to migration.

At the UN, national governments come together to develop multilateral agreements and guidelines. As the UN has 193 member states, engaging with the UN ecosystem as a researcher provides an opportunity to inform policy or standards on a global level.

Working with UN bodies will bring further credibility to your research and offer you a public platform and the chance to build wider networks.

Engagement with professionals working within the UN system can provide an avenue for impact for your research: it can be used in REF case study submissions, it can maximise uptake of your research in policy decisions, it can enable access to new datasets, it can lead to consultancy and contracting opportunities and aligns with UCL-wide initiatives such as the Grand Challenges or work on SDGs.

The UN system places an emphasis on the importance of evidence-based policy and science advice. UN agencies use a multitude of tools to promote evidence-based policies, which sets a positive backdrop for engagement with scientific researchers.

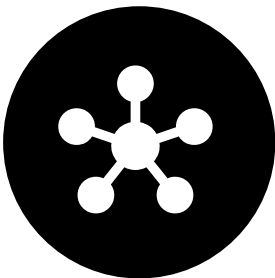


Which UN Agency should I engage with?

'The UN' is commonly used as shorthand to describe a set of member states that agreed to come together to establish peace after World War Two and now cooperate for mutual benefit and a better world.

The main bodies of the United Nations are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat. All were established under the **UN Charter** when the Organisation was founded in 1945. However, the wider 'UN system' is not a single organisation, but a complex eco-system of funds, programmes and specialised agencies, each of which have their own area of work, leadership and budget. You can find a useful overview of the constituent parts of the UN system **here**.

UN agencies tend to be large and autonomous. They will also each have their own established processes to allow participation of external stakeholders such as NGOs, civil society, the private sector and academia.



What is the role of scientific advice in the UN ecosystem?

UN bodies are both consumers and producers of scientific knowledge. They often generate their own scientific reports, yet also make use of external scientific expert input. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) provides scientific advice in support of setting international food standards which is a key element of global food safety governance.

Scientific advice is held in high esteem by the UN. The creation of panels such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which involves thousands of scientists, shows the role and potential of scientific advice in addressing global challenges within the UN.

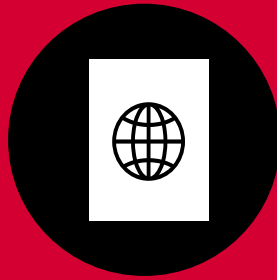
In 2013, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the creation of the Scientific Advisory Board to strengthen the interface between science and policy, so that the latest scientific findings would be reflected in high-level policy discussions. You can find out more about the Board **here**.

Which policy instruments exist at UN-level?



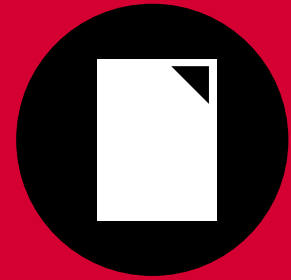
Agendas & Narratives

e.g. UN Sustainable Development Goals; the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda



International Treaties

e.g. the Paris Climate Agreement



Regulations

e.g. International Health Regulations



Standards and Norms

e.g. ISO/IEC 27001 on information security



Guidelines

e.g. WHO's four guidelines on anti-microbial resistance. [Producing guidelines, e.g. to define how certain drugs are used, is an advanced evidence-based policymaking process.]



Sanctions

e.g. UNSC Resolution 2231 (2015) on uranium mining for weaponization



How can I engage with the UN policymaking process as a researcher?

Many UN Agencies have calls for experts or rosters on specific topics, which they publicise on their websites. For example, the FAO or World Health Organisation (WHO) might call for experts on a Risk Assessment of Microbiological Hazards related to Food Safety. You can find their current call for experts [here](#).

UN agencies also work via advisory groups that bring together individual experts to provide scientific, technical or strategic advice. The WHO publicises its **[open calls for advisory groups](#)**. Other organisations, for example the International Organization for Migration, have permanent High-level expert groups.

The UN frequently engages experts under individual contracts to work on short-term projects either as a consultant or an individual contractor. You can find out more [here](#).

The UN regularly hosts a range of conferences around specific topics or challenges. You can apply to attend a conference, speak at a conference and, often, host side-events. For example, see a list of upcoming events surrounding the SDGs [here](#) or the list of events taking place at the UN in Geneva [here](#).

Various intergovernmental panels also have calls for experts and fellows during assessments. Fellowship calls tend to be targeted towards early-career researchers wishing to gain experience in science advice - see for example the fellowship programme offered by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) [here](#).

To take part in these calls, a nomination by a government or an organisation is needed. This highlights the value for researchers in engaging with their governments and civil society organisations as a stepping stone to participation in international and/or UN policy processes.



What are the challenges I might encounter when engaging with UN policymaking?

Academics and policymakers tend to operate within different timeframes. A policy response might be urgently needed in a short time window which is difficult to meet in academia, where lead in times tend to be longer. You will have to make sure to be available, secure a buy-out of your time, or have the necessary managerial support in place to accept ad hoc engagements.

Academic and policy actors have different societal functions and work cultures, which can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Being mindful of the difference of professional languages and mindsets is a good start for developing the capacity to straddle these different 'worlds'.

Different UN bodies have different cultures, ways of working and ways of engaging with academia. Having worked with one body doesn't necessarily translate easily to working with another.

Like much of the public sector, UN bodies have tight budgets. You may be asked to present at a conference or provide advice, but you will likely not be paid for your time.

It can also be difficult for countries to adhere to the regulations published by the UN. So even if your research has informed policy at this level, be aware that this may not necessarily translate into impact on the ground.



Where should I start?



I'm interested in engaging with UN policymaking as a researcher. Where should I start?

If you're interested in engaging with the UN as a researcher, the first things to consider are what you want to achieve and what the mode of engagement should be. Engagement that informs strategic priorities will require an understanding of who the relevant decision-makers and their priorities are, and where the windows of opportunity for agenda setting or policy influence lie.

You will also need to consider how relevant your research is at UN level. It may be useful to familiarise yourself with recent publications or activities by UN bodies in your field to see where your research most aligns with areas of interest.

If you are interested in pursuing formal opportunities, for example the provision of consultancy services or joining an expert group, note that you may have to free up a considerable amount of time for this type of work.

TOP TIPS AND USEFUL LINKS



Presenting your work effectively

Whether you're engaging with policymakers within the UK Government, the European Union or the UN, the way you present your research will be critical to success.

Remember to put yourself in the shoes of the policymaker you are addressing: how can your research findings help them? Don't assume detailed prior knowledge, and distil key messages in non-technical language where possible.

For more on how to engage effectively with policy audiences, write for policy audiences, and how to conceptualise and achieve policy impact please see: UCL Public Policy ExTend Module:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/home/support/training>

TOP TIP:

Find allies! Whilst, ideally, you might want to engage directly with a UN body, you should also consider engaging with the wider ecosystem surrounding the UN such as advocacy groups and charities, research or professional networks. Many of these external organisations have existing relationships on specific issues, such as poverty relief, nature, migration, gender or education. If you find an organisation whose agenda aligns with your own interests, and which may be looking for scientific advice to inform their positions, this may be a good way to engage with UN bodies indirectly.

TOP TIP:

Use your network! Just like colleagues in academia, UN staff may rely on personal contacts for specific pieces of work. The available formal channels for scientific advice can be limited and infrequent, so do ask your colleagues to introduce you to their contacts and network as much as you can at events and conferences. You may wish to share information about your projects with these contacts to raise awareness of your expertise in the field.

TOP TIP:

Stay alert! Know the policy process, the policymakers' agendas and how science is used in the given organisation. Experts can be used to legitimise a certain position – so make sure that your research is not taken out of context and is represented in a way you endorse.

Sources of support at UCL

Find information, resources and case studies on international policy engagement [here](#).

To discuss options and models for engaging in policy-related services provision to UN bodies, please contact [UCL Consultants](#).

To find out more about how UCL research and expertise is contributing to the SDGs, find more information [here](#).

Additional support

To access knowledge and resources on how to engage with the international Geneva policy ecosystem, you can check out the Geneva Science-Policy Interface: www.gspi.ch

Case studies and examples of engaging with UN policymaking



To bridge the research-policy divide in global governance, UCL hosted researchers from across the globe and UN practitioners for a week long workshop led by Dr Inken von Borzyskowski.



During 2020-22, Professor Eloise Scotford, Professor of Environmental Law, supported UNEP to develop new models of air quality legislation globally.



Led by Prof Paul Ekins, UCL researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Resources are collaborating with businesses and UN Environment Programmes to accelerate environment protection action.



In a study for UNESCO, Prof Tim Williams' research deepened public understanding of Silk Roads heritage, inspired a new policy framework for World Heritage nominations, and improved conservation in the region.

Find more in our [case study bank](#)

ucl.ac.uk/public-policy

ucl.ac.uk/global

