

Governing principles for the Committee's work

Approved at the sixty-first session of UNSCEAR (Vienna, 21-25 July 2014), amended at the sixty-second session (Vienna, 1-5 June 2015).

Preamble

The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) was established by the General Assembly in 1955 in response to the international community's growing concern over potential health impact of fallout from the ongoing and expanding atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Originally, the Assembly invited 15 United Nations Member States (now 27) to nominate scientists as representatives to the Committee, and tasked them with assessing exposures to atomic (or ionizing) radiation, and health effects associated with such exposures, and to report their findings to the Assembly. Whereas exposure to fallout from nuclear weapons testing became much less prominent over the decades, the Committee continues to evaluate exposures to the human population worldwide from all natural and man-made sources of ionizing radiation. It also reviews and reports on the current understanding of the effects of exposure to ionizing radiation at the molecular, cellular and tissue levels, on diseases and health risks among the human population, and on the natural environment.

The Committee does not develop policy or provide advice to governments or regional or international bodies. However, many governments and relevant bodies choose to make use of the Committee's scientific evaluations for their own development of policies, e.g. with regard to health care, protection of the public and the environment, emergency preparedness, remediation of contaminated land, and decisions related to the use of ionizing radiation across the whole range of potential applications.

The subjects of the Committee's scientific evaluations may in some cases be relevant to debates on issues that are contentious, controversial and politically charged. The Committee does not take a position in such debates; however, the Committee's scientific evaluations may inform such debates. The value to the international community of the Committee's scientific evaluations is dependent on the scientific rigour by which they are undertaken, but also on the credibility and scientific integrity of the membership of the Committee. Representatives to the Committee, their alternates and their advisers do not bear any bias or conflict of interest. It is acknowledged that such bias or conflict of interest would greatly undermine the credibility of the Committee's scientific evaluations and reduce their value to the international community.

Representatives to the Committee, their alternates and their advisers, and the Committee as a collective, maintain high ethical standards in how they discharge their duties, and the Committee is administered in a way that promotes unbiased evaluations with high scientific integrity.

Representatives, alternates and advisers need to be aware of the expectations surrounding their conduct, as outlined in these Governing Principles for the Committee's work.

Mandate of the Committee

The Committee's mandate is to assess and report levels, effects and risks of exposure to ionizing radiation. UNSCEAR reports are based on science, and are neutral with respect to policy, although they may need to deal objectively with scientific and technical factors relevant to the application of particular policies. The Committee decides on priority areas for evaluation and records these in its programme of work.

The Committee is accountable to the General Assembly of the United Nations

The Committee is accountable as a whole to the General Assembly of the United Nations, and thus applies the fundamental values of the United Nations to its work and deliberations. The States members of the Committee have been selected by virtue of their ability to contribute to the work of the Committee, and derive no additional political privilege above States not members of the Committee. The Committee concentrates its activities on fulfilling its mandate and on tasks allotted to it by the General Assembly. The Committee is ultimately responsible for its reports, and not the writers or experts who have prepared material for its scrutiny.

UNEP is responsible for servicing the Committee

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is responsible for servicing the Committee—it provides the secretariat, whose head is the Secretary of the Committee. The Secretary of the Committee reports to the Executive Director of UNEP through the appropriate channels. The secretariat provides important institutional continuity and centralized administrative and technical support. Inter alia, it prepares and services the annual sessions of the Committee, prepares draft documents for the Committee's scrutiny, manages the funding allocated for the Committee's work, engages expertise as necessary, and ensures that UN protocols for processes and timelines are followed.

Members must demonstrate competence and integrity

Representatives, alternates and advisers are nominated by Governments on the basis of their scientific qualifications and experience, and are to perform scientific evaluations in accordance with established scientific procedures and values. They are to have sustainable in-depth knowledge on a broad range of relevant scientific and technical issues, stay abreast of scientific developments, foster effective support nationally, apply sound judgement, and to communicate the implications of their reviews. They are also to act independently (although delegations are to provide coordinated input on the grounds of efficiency), and to discharge their duties without bias in relation to external pressures or interests that may be in conflict (real or perceived) with the Committee's procedures and tasks. They are to guard the reputation of the Committee, and declare any such potential conflict of interest and/or recuse themselves from decisions or judgements where they might jeopardize the impartiality of the member or of the scientific evaluation of the Committee. They also are to act with integrity, applying a questioning and open-minded attitude, being respectful of differing viewpoints, communicating truthfully and honestly, and respecting matters of intellectual property.

Officers of the Committee rotate and reflect an equitable geographical distribution

Officers of the Committee include the UNSCEAR Chair, three Vice-Chairs, and a Rapporteur, elected on two-year terms and with the intention of electing a new Chair after two years of service in that position. No individual should serve as an officer for more than six years. These officers are elected from among representatives and alternates with the necessary competence, experience and capability to discharge their duties as officers, and with due regard to geographical distribution. When the Programme of Work of the Committee focuses on a scientific issue that may be contentious, the Committee endeavours to take due care in its election of Chair and Vice-Chair, and any other function of significance for carrying out the work, to avoid any real or perceived conflicts of interest.

The officers collectively constitute the Bureau of the Committee. The immediate past Chair, and the Secretary of the Committee, are advisers to the Bureau.

Conduct of the Committee's work

The Committee's scientific evaluations are undertaken in a variety of ways: this includes the work of consultants engaged by the secretariat under the oversight of the Bureau, groups of experts from within the Committee, or larger groups of experts comprising scientists nominated by UN Member States on a voluntary basis. These professionals are also bound by the same expectations of scientific qualifications, experience, procedures and values as Members of the Committee. Review of drafts by delegations is an essential part of the UNSCEAR process to ensure quality.

The Bureau's purpose is to strengthen and facilitate timely and effective implementation of the UNSCEAR programme of work in accordance with UNSCEAR's mandate and Governing Principles, decisions of the Committee, resolutions of the General Assembly, and applicable United Nations regulations, rules and procedures.

Major decisions of the Committee are taken in plenary meetings. The Committee reports annually to the General Assembly on progress in conducting its programme of work, and the findings of its scientific evaluations.

The Committee's scientific evaluations are available to all

The Scientific Annexes underpinning the reports to the General Assembly are available as United Nations publications but can also be downloaded freely from the Committee's website, www.unscear.org. The Bureau and secretariat endeavour to communicate the findings of the Committee to the General Assembly, the scientific community (e.g. in conferences and scientific symposia) and the public as reasonably practicable. Representatives to the Committee, their alternates and advisers do not reflect their personal views in the name of the Committee and avoid confusing any audience as to the scientific position of the Committee as a whole. They do not represent the Committee without approval through the secretariat.