

A message from the Assistant Director-General and Executive Secretary of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO

The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) is celebrating 50 years since the historic decision of the 1960 UNESCO General Conference to establish an organization that could coordinate among governments the necessary operational, logistical, and legal support necessary for conducting marine science on an international scale. Forty States joined as Members of the new Commission during its first year. Today IOC has 138 Member States and works as a body with functional autonomy within UNESCO.

In partnership with other UN agencies -- such as WMO, FAO, and UNEP -- as well as with hundreds of oceanographic and marine research laboratories, the IOC is playing a critical role in addressing the major challenges facing the world's ocean. Key programs include identifying and protecting marine biodiversity, monitoring the ocean's response to global climate change, and coordinating a global coastal hazards and tsunami early warning system.

The services that the IOC has offered over the last 50 years are to be commended. But during this 50th anniversary we are especially excited to look forward toward the future. Never has the IOC been so necessary as it is today. We are increasingly confronted with challenges of a global nature, requiring exactly the kind of intergovernmental platform that IOC offers.

The magnitude 9.0 earthquake of 26 December 2004 triggered a basin-wide Indian Ocean tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people in eleven countries -- over 30,000 of them in Sri Lanka, some 1600 kilometres away from the epicentre in Indonesia. Unlike in the Pacific Ocean, where IOC has been coordinating a tsunami warning centre since 1965, there was no early warning capacity for the Indian Ocean. As the UN-affiliated organization with responsibility for the oceans, the IOC was asked to coordinate a global effort to establish tsunami warning systems as part of an overall multi-hazard coastal disaster reduction strategy. After intense and delicate intergovernmental diplomacy involving 28 countries, an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system was set up in under 5 years and is now owned by the Member States. Similar systems are also nearing completion for the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and North Atlantic.

Much of what IOC does may not seem glamorous. It is often behind-the-scenes work such as meetings and consultations, agreements, and seminars. But at the grass-root level the main corpus of IOC are the scientists themselves, at sea and in laboratories around the globe. Through IOC researchers are able to form networks of cooperation and share ideas and resources that enable them to tackle challenges that are too big for any one research centre, one nation, or even one region. Indeed one of the founding mandates of IOC has been to coordinate global observations of the ocean. The physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the ocean are important vital signs of the planet's well-being. But to understand indications of change it is critical to monitor these vital signs frequently, with as fine detail as possible, and from marine locations around the world. Just in the last 10 years, for example, the IOC has helped countries launch more than 3,000 Argo floats, which take more than 100,000 salinity and temperature profiles each year -- more than 20 times the annual hydrography profiles taken from research vessels. Last year, IOC helped to develop the "Assessment of Assessments" study -- the first step in launching a Regular Process for assessing the state of the marine environment in order to have a more holistic and integrated picture of the ocean.

As a global organization the IOC relies on the continued support of its Member States, in terms of commitment and funding, to help improve the level of research, data exchange and dialogue on ocean-related issues. Credible and timely scientific information is essential to understanding the impacts of global change and to guide responses. With economies around the world still coping with recession, it would be ill-advised to think that oceanographic research is an expensive luxury.

This 50th anniversary of IOC should help remind Member States why continued and strengthened support of IOC is a vital investment for our future.

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