

## ISDC December 2025 Progress Update

### Purpose

This pre-read provides the Independent Science for Development Council's (ISDC's) 2025 progress update. It describes the activities, outputs, and Chair interactions since 1 July 2025.

The main ISDC activities during the reporting period included the review of CGIAR's Inception Reports for the 2025–2030 Science and Innovation Portfolio, onboarding of new Council members and chair, as well as development of a brief primer on tools to support CGIAR leadership's future strategic prioritization (submitted as a separate pre-read to SC23).

These activities, along with meetings and coordination between ISDC and key stakeholders, are detailed in the document. An Annex is included, providing a brief analysis of the uptake of Inception Report review recommendations, based on the initial Management Action Plan.

### Action Requested

The System Council is requested to read and reflect on ISDC 2025 workplan update to discuss and ask questions during the ISDC Chair intervention at SC23.

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This document may be shared without restriction.

Prepared by: Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC) and its Secretariat.

## ISDC December 2025 Progress Update

This Progress Update documents key outcomes, outputs, and activities of the Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC) from July through December 2025. The ISDC in-person meeting will follow SC23 in Abu Dhabi for travel cost savings.

### Workstreams of ISDC in 2025: (1) Inception Report Review, (2) New Members & Chair, and (3) Prioritization Primer

The core focus for 2025 was the review of the [Inception Reports](#) that was delivered to System Council (SC) Secretariat on 6 August 2025. Other key activities over the past six months included managing the transition of outgoing and incoming members and chair, as well as developing a primer that consolidates the tools ISDC has produced since 2020 to support management decisions on CGIAR's strategic prioritization processes. The following sections provide further detail on these outputs.

#### (1) Inception Report Review and Communication

The priority output in June-August 2025 was the [external review](#) of the 2025-30 Portfolio Inception Reports that was requested during the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of System Council. ISDC met in-person in mid-July to build consensus on the Inception Report assessment in Edinburgh, Scotland hosted by The James Hutton Institute—also the previous institutional home of the new ISDC chair, Lesley Torrance. Overall, ISDC recommended that the Portfolio should now be supported and implemented. Recommendations contained in the Report should be considered as part of the Implementation Phase.

The outgoing and incoming ISDC chairs—Holger Meinke and Lesley Torrance—participated in two System Council/Integrated Partnership Board (IPB) drop-ins calls scheduled by the System Organization on 10 September, to support dissemination of the ISDC assessment.

The SC23 pre-meetings for System Council members occurred on 21 October. The purpose of these calls prior to Council meetings is to maintain good communication between ISDC and System Council and to engage outside of formal meeting settings. Typically held two weeks prior to System Council meetings, ISDC scheduled the two optional calls in well in advance of SC23 to update and discuss further aspects of the ISDC Inception Report review, namely the Report section “Moving Forward with Tough Decisions for System Council.” Additionally, the meetings provided time to present and discuss the ISDC proposed 2026 workplan. A summary of the meeting and the PowerPoint slides were shared the following week to System Council members and its secretariat.

Inspired by the ongoing discussion in the context of the Strategic Impact, Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (SIMEC) advisory body review and exploratory conversations about how to better track uptake, the ISDC Inception Report review (Aug. 025) recommendations were compared to the Management Action Plan (Sep. 2025) using artificial intelligence synthesis tools and fact-checking. Annex 1 provides a summary analysis.

## (2) Chair and Membership Transitions

With 50 percent of ISDC leaving their roles in 2025 because of term limits, an incoming member conducted one-on-one exit interviews in July to gain perspectives useful to the ISDC Secretariat, the Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES), and the incoming chair and members. The interviews were conducted with three members and the outgoing chair who had each served six years in ISDC, and the chair had previous service with Independent Science and Partnership Council (ISDC's predecessor). An internal report of the findings was developed and a brief was shared SIMEC as supplemental information to the SIMEC Advisory Body Review.

ISDC welcomed Bruce Lankford, Emeritus Professor at the University of East Anglia, and Ingrid Fromm, Research Associate, International Agriculture Bern University of Applied Sciences, on 1 July. However, due to personal reasons, Bruce Lankford resigned in late September.

ISDC also welcomed member Lesley Torrance (2019-2025) as the new chair in September 2025. Her onboarding was quick and her first week officially in the position consisted of a visit to Rome to attend SIMEC and IPB06 meetings from 23-29 September. Excerpts from their bios are below.

- [Lesley Torrance](#) holds a PhD and DSc in plant virology and has published extensively in this field. Later in her career, she led and participated in multidisciplinary research projects in plant and crop science, in particular potato systems research, in many countries including in Europe, China, Malawi and Kenya. She retired from her roles as Professor of Biology, University of St Andrews and as Executive Director of Science at The James Hutton Institute in 2024. In her role at Hutton she was responsible for the strategic direction and delivery of research on crop and environmental sciences and executive team lead responsible for science excellence and research impact.
- [Ingrid Fromm](#) holds a PhD in Development Economics from Leipzig University in Germany and a BSc. in Agronomy from Zamorano University in Honduras. Her work focuses on food systems and global value chains and their impact on economic, environmental, and social development. For the past 20 years, Dr. Fromm has conducted value chain research in multi-country trade commodities such as cocoa, coffee, banana, and palm oil as well as fresh vegetables and pulses. She has led research projects and consultancies in numerous countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

To support the transition of new members and streamline onboarding, ISDC launched an internally designed interactive e-learning platform—[ISDC 101](#). Because of the usefulness outside of ISDC member onboarding, the Secretariat deployed a communication campaign to encourage System Council, SIMEC, and IPB members and CGIAR leadership and scientists to complete the online learning.

### (3) Brief Primer on Tools to Prioritize a Research and Innovation Portfolio in a Complex System Involving Multiple Decision Makers

As a SC-23 pre-read, ISDC developed a brief primer on tools to support CGIAR leadership's future strategic prioritization of the research and innovation portfolio. This primer is a compendium of processes and tools prepared by ISDC and associated experts (2020-2025); it has been assembled in one document in part to raise awareness of the tools with new leadership team members. These tools aid objective priority setting and are intended to help formulate decisions that are well-informed, coherent, transparent, and aligned with CGIAR's mission.

### Coordinating Across CGIAR Stakeholders: Meetings and Communication

ISDC Chair Lesley Torrance participated in the following meetings from September through December.

- System Council/IPB Portfolio drop-in calls (September)
- IPB06 and SIMEC meetings (September, in presence, Rome), coupled with
  - Juan Lucas Restrepo, Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT Director General
  - FAO Chief Scientist a.i.
  - IFAD Director for Global Engagement
  - Quarterly EMD, ISDC and SPIA Chair, and IAES Director meeting
- General Assembly of Centers (October)
- Select IPB member interested in foresight (October)
- System Council and SIMEC secretariat onboarding (October)
- Meeting with Chief Scientist Office (November)
- IPB07 (November)
- With ISDC members, quarterly EMD, ISDC and SPIA Chair, and IAES Director meeting (December, in presence, Abu Dhabi)
- ISDC with Digital Transformation management planned for ISDC meeting (December)
- ISDC in-person meeting following SC23 (December)

## Annex 1: Brief Analysis of ISDC Inception Report Recommendations Uptake

This activity was inspired by ongoing discussion in the context of SIMEC advisory body review and exploratory conversations about how to better track uptake. Using artificial intelligence synthesis tools and fact-checking, the Inception Report review (August 2025) recommendations were compared to the Management Action Plan (September 2025). This Annex synthesizes the two documents, highlighting what is being taken up, enacted, or rebutted. It identifies patterns and trends across themes and Programs and Accelerators.

### Snapshot of ISDC's Seven Main Recommendations

A total of seven overarching ISDC recommendation themes were analyzed across 13 Program and Accelerator Inception Reports. From a broad perspective, approximately

- 57% of recommendations are fully accepted and time-bound for action.
- 29% are partially accepted, neither fully accepted or rejected.
- 14% rejected, mainly where Management maintains strategic discretion.

Overall, management's uptake is strongest on systemwide governance, budgeting, and risk management, while structural integration and comparative advantage debates remain contested.

### Snapshot of Recommendations and Response

ISDC Recommendation Theme	Management Stance	Concrete Action/Timeline
Strategy & Portfolio Narrative Update	Accepted	Review of 2030 Strategy (Q4 2025); revised Portfolio Narrative by Nov 2025
Research Hypotheses & Metrics	Accepted	Stronger hypotheses and SMART KPIs in 2026 Plans of Results and Budgets (PORB)
Budgeting Under Uncertainty	Accepted	Scenario-based, modular W1/2 budget (Nov–Dec 2025)
Risk Architecture	Accepted	Risk & Internal Controls function by end-2025; training H1 2026
Portfolio Cohesion	Partially Accepted	Strengthen linkages in 2026 PORB
Merge 'Multifunctional Landscapes & Sustainable Farming'	Rejected	Separate Programs; coordination via PORBs
Food Frontiers & Security Focus	Partially Accepted	Narrower scope and clarified narrative by Q4 2025; AoW1 'critical capability' Q1 2026

### Program- and Accelerator-Level Uptake

- Policy Innovation: Explicit hypotheses and refined Theories of Change (ToCs) by Q3 2025—directly addressing ISDC’s concern over weak research framing.
- Digital Transformation Accelerator: Pivot toward partner-led models (AI71, AWS, Databricks) in low-comparative-advantage areas.
- Gender Equality & Inclusion Accelerator: SMART KPIs across Centers (2026 PORB) and expanded risk tracking.
- Genebanks: Continued alignment with Crop Trust, maintaining mandated core functions and efficiency safeguards.

### Patterns and Trends

#### Strong Uptake Areas:

- Governance and Strategy: Clear, time-bound actions to update the 2030 *Strategy and Portfolio Narrative*.
- Evidence Discipline: 2026 planning to embed testable hypotheses, ToCs, and measurable KPIs, aligning with ISDC’s call for rigor.
- Budget Resilience: Multi-scenario planning integrated into W1 and 2 budgeting, improving resource flexibility.
- Risk Management: Institutionalized function with systemwide rollout by 2026, indicating material governance reform.

### Forward-Looking Checkpoints (Early 2026)

1. Updated *Strategy and Narrative* presented to SC23 and reflected in 2026 PORBs.
2. SMART KPIs and AoW-level hypotheses visible in 2026 PORBs.
3. Scenario-based budgeting demonstrably guiding W1/2 allocations.
4. Operational risk unit active and influencing portfolio decisions.
5. Cross-linkages (e.g., Multifunctional Landscapes and Sustainable Farming) evidenced through joint deliverables.
6. Refined Food Frontiers AoWs aligned with comparative advantage and clarified partnerships.

### In Summary

Management’s responses demonstrate a trajectory toward a more disciplined, transparent, and risk-aware Portfolio. Whether these commitments lead to implementation will depend on how well they’re carried out in the 2026 planning cycle.