



Terms of reference for the group of experts on the development of standard operating procedures on sampling, processing and sharing of biological samples and genetic data from the Area

Background

The International Seabed Authority (ISA) Deep-sea Biobank initiative aims to promote global access to biological samples and genetic data from the international seabed area (the Area). To this end, it seeks to create a set of standard operating procedures (SOPs) on sampling, processing and sharing of biological samples and genetic data from the Area, building upon existing best practices and recommendations of the ISA Legal and Technical Commission (LTC), with a view to enhancing scientific collaboration and data quality. In particular, the SOPs will effectively enable comparative analyses and synergistic research for protecting and using deep-sea biological resources for various purposes.

The SOPs will be developed through an expert process to adequately address necessary scientific, technical, and legal aspects. Experts from various scientific institutions with relevant expertise, as well as members of the LTC and contractors will be invited to contribute to the process. Especially on the process for sharing of samples with the Biobank, the host country and institution will be effectively engaged to ensure the process is compatible with the domestic rules, regulations, and procedures.

To this end, the ISA secretariat is convening an informal group of experts (GoE) to define the scope and prepare draft SOPs, based on the results of research and gap analysis conducted by the secretariat.

Objectives

The GoE will be tasked to:

1. Review a draft scope prepared by the ISA secretariat.
2. Review and synthesize existing information and best practices to inform draft SOPs.
3. Define the scope of the priority SOPs.
4. Prepare draft SOPs and describe areas for further analysis and development.

Membership

The ISA secretariat is seeking 20 voluntary experts from scientific organizations, research and academic institutions as well as ISA contractors. Members will be selected based on their knowledge, skills, and experiences, related to the objectives, including:

1. Collecting, processing, and managing deep-sea biological samples.
2. Collecting, analyzing and sharing marine biological and genetic data and information.

3. Work of ISA and the BBNJ Agreement, especially on environmental baseline studies, impact assessments, and management measures.
4. Developing and applying standardized scientific methodologies.

Members will be invited through the following processes, taking into account geographical and gender balance.

1. An open call.
2. Selected invitation from the pool of experts that participated in ISA scientific initiatives.
3. Nomination by ISA contractors.
4. Nomination by host institutions of the Deep-sea Biobank facility.

Work modality

The work of the GoE will be undertaken virtually, supported by the ISA secretariat. Online meetings will be held regularly to assess progress, discuss key issues, and define the next steps. Members of the GoE are expected to actively participate in the discussions, share information, provide input, and contribute to the drafting exercise. Three members of the LTC in their individual capacity will be invited to provide advice on scientific, legal, and data-related topics, as needed.

Expected output

The draft SOPs will inform an international workshop with a broader range of experts and stakeholders for their input, based on which the draft will be further refined. A limited number of participants from the GoE will be reserved, subject to organizational requirements and discussions with co-cochairs of the workshop. As part of the SOPs, a process for sharing samples with the ISA Deep-sea Biobank and facilitating their access will also be developed, defining feasible, efficient, and equitable terms and reference, in collaboration with the host institutions.

Following the workshop, the revised SOPs will be promoted at various international forums, especially related to the BBNJ Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, as a key output of the ISA Deep-sea Biobank Initiative. The SOPs will also be presented to the LTC for their information and possible consideration in relation to their existing recommendation of relevance. The SOPs will be reviewed and updated as appropriate to ensure they reflect the best available science and technology. Members of the GoE will continue to be invited and engaged for future activities related to the review, revision, and training on the SOPs, as appropriate.