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<u>Item **4** of the provisional agenda</u>

FOLLOW-UP TO DECISIONS AND RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE AT THEIR PREVIOUS SESSIONS

PART III

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

ADDENDUM 2

COMMENTS BY THE INTERNATIONAL STAFF ASSOCIATION OF UNESCO (ISAU)

SUMMARY

C.   Sustainability of the field network

Pursuant to Item 9.2.7 of the UNESCO Human Resources Manual, the International Staff Association of UNESCO (ISAU) submits its comments on management issues (document 222 EX/4.III.C).

A shared, fair, people-centred reform

1.   The full implementation of a fit-for-purpose field network remains essential to the Organization's effectiveness. To this end, ISAU remains convinced that Phase II of the field reform strategy must adopt a more systemic approach to human resources, addressing challenges in workforce planning and staff rights. This includes regularizing long-term precarious assignments (e.g., temporary contracts and related arrangements), establishing cross-functional roles to strengthen regional office expertise, and effectively recognizing the professional aspirations of staff.

2.   The workforce planning process launched under the 2023–2027 Human Resources Strategy must be grounded in inclusive, transparent and sustained consultation, with the full involvement of staff associations. This is key to ensuring sustainable outcomes in career development, talent management, succession planning, mobility and learning. Organization-wide consultation processes between Headquarters and field offices are also essential to engage all staff and harness insights through inclusive, open dialogue. It must be fully acknowledged that an efficient field office network cannot deliver satisfactory results without an effective upstream coordination of staff issues.

3.   The same logic of co-construction should guide the development of country, regional and liaison strategies, as well as the introduction of new Accountability Compacts and associated matrices. These represent a strategic opportunity to draw upon the field experience and knowledge of UNESCO staff, whose involvement is indispensable to ensure the contextual relevance and programmatic coherence of these strategies.

4.   We note that, as of June 2025, only 31 of the 71 positions created under document 42 C/5 have been filled. The slow pace of implementation undermines the reform process. Moreover, the optimal use of the US$20 million allocated to the reform remains unclear, particularly regarding the sustainability of funding for new posts. We encourage the Administration to provide greater transparency on the allocation and long-term viability of these resources. Clear progress indicators should be adopted to ensure that Member States can effectively keep track of the pace of the reform.

5.   The reform's objectives cannot be realistically achieved without appropriate budget allocations. We stress that any available and additional resources should primarily be used to regularize precarious assignments. This is both a matter of justice and performance: UNESCO cannot successfully implement this reform without relying on staff who have demonstrated constant commitment and invaluable internal expertise.

6.   We draw attention to the distribution of the 60 newly created posts: 43% are dedicated to support and liaison functions, compared to 57% for programme positions. This ratio raises questions about the actual efficiency of the reform, which was initially intended to create synergies and economies of scale to strengthen programmatic action in the field. We encourage the Administration to clarify the criteria underlying this distribution, including any benchmarks or intended outcomes.

A consistent and integrated reform

7.   Another major concern is the lack of clarity regarding the integration of all decentralized components of the Organization in the reform process. For instance, the absence of references to category 1 institutes and decentralized programme units raises questions as to the concrete outcomes that are expected as to the improvement of UNESCO's presence and action at the country-level. These entities, integral to UNESCO, must be included in a global strategy for worldwide presence. Their omission undermines organizational coherence and complicates the implementation of a smooth mobility policy across entities. We encourage the Administration to adopt a less siloed approach when it comes to organizing its presence in the field. In this sense, ISAU insists that the reform of UNESCO's field office network should not be a matter for the sole administrative unit in charge of field offices but an Organization-wide integrated undertaking at the highest level of decision-making.

8.   Furthermore, the field network reform must be implemented consistently across both geographic and programmatic dimensions, ensuring adequate resources for effective operations in all regional contexts and full involvement of all programme sectors. The current reform process shows uneven geographical application, hampering its overall coherence and credibility. It also lacks clearly defined roles for programme sectors and relevant entities in the design and implementation of the reformed field network. In this respect, an integrated organizational approach that places programme and staff at its core, leveraging UNESCO's multidisciplinary expertise, is essential to the reform's effectiveness, sustainability and credibility.

9.   Finally, the document remains silent on the degree of actual decentralization of programme activities. Beyond the creation of posts, the increased and consistent decentralization of operational activities and associated budgetary resources is indispensable to ensure UNESCO's credible and sustainable presence across all regions. This evolution must be accompanied by clear mechanisms for delegated authority and regional budget management, ensuring full alignment between workforce planning and programme implementation.

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PART III

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

SUMMARY

C.   Sustainability of the field network

Pursuant to 220 EX/Decision 5.III.B, the Director-General submits this progress report on the implementation of Phase II of the overall strategy for UNESCO's presence in the world. The document presents a consolidated assessment of the progress achieved and the challenges encountered during the 2024-2025 biennium. It also draws key lessons from the reform process and identifies priority areas for continued consolidation and strategic investment moving forward.

Decision required: paragraph 26.

I.   Introduction

1.   This document responds to 220 EX/Decision 5.III.B requesting a follow-up on the implementation of Phase II of the field reform strategy. It also offers a broader reflection as Phases I and II conclude, at a time when preparations for the new programme and budget cycle are underway.

II.   Background and Strategic Objectives

2.   The overall strategy for UNESCO's global presence was launched in 2018 under the Strategic Transformation initiative, aimed at modernizing and harmonizing the Organization's field network. The objective was to resolve fragmentation and structural inconsistencies, particularly between the reformed African model and the legacy three-tier structure used elsewhere. The strategy aligned with broader reforms of the United Nations Development System (UNDS) and sought to make UNESCO's field presence more responsive, coherent, and aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

3.   The strategy was designed to be implemented in two phases. Phase I focused on designing the reform model, conducting extensive consultations with Member States, and initiating structural changes that had no significant financial implications. Phase II, launched in 2024, prioritized consolidation of the new structure, reinforcement of field capacities, enhanced coordination with the United Nations system, and the operationalization of accountability and support mechanisms.

4.   Following broad consultations with Member States, a consensus emerged around transitioning to a two-tier structure composed of empowered Regional Offices and flexible, needs-based National Offices. This model was formally endorsed at the 212th session of the Executive Board and approved at the 215th session.

5.   Strategic objectives of the reform included:

- Replacing the fragmented three-tier configuration with a coherent two-tier model;
- Enhancing strategic leadership and cross-sectoral integration at the regional level;
- Aligning UNESCO's field network with UN Cooperation Frameworks and national priorities;
- Increasing efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness;
- Strengthening resource mobilization and decentralized support functions.

6.   In support of these objectives, significant investments were mobilized under document 42 C/5. This included a $20 million allocation, which enabled the creation of 60 new field positions and the reprofiling of 11 existing posts. In addition, 29 limited-duration project appointments were financed through the Special Account for the U.S. contribution.

7.   The reform also designated five lead Regional Offices – Bangkok, Beirut, Dakar, Santiago, and Venice – to coordinate UNESCO's contributions to UN development cooperation.

8.   The location of UNESCO's Regional Office for the Pacific remained unresolved until an independent assessment by the Internal Oversight Services (Nov. 2024-Feb. 2025) recommended maintaining the office in Apia and continuing the Suva antenna. This recommendation, presented at the 221st Executive Board session (221 EX/5.II.C), received strong support from Member States, especially in view of SIDS coordination needs. With this decision, UNESCO's field structure now comprises 53 offices: 20 regional, 29 national, and four liaison offices, including dual-function offices like Addis Ababa and Cairo (serving both national/regional and liaison roles).

III. Progress report on Phase II of the overall strategy for UNESCO's presence in the world (2024-2025)

A. Structural Coherence and Clarification of Roles

9. The shift to a uniform two-tier configuration has brought greater clarity to UNESCO's field architecture, addressing longstanding inconsistencies and fragmentation. By clarifying the respective roles and responsibilities of Regional and National Offices – particularly in terms of the functions of Directors and Heads of Offices - the model has contributed to more consistent lines of coordination and accountability.

10. Although the overall number of offices has remained stable, the functional recategorization of some offices has allowed better alignment with the diversity of national and subregional needs. This structural clarity has contributed to more coherent program delivery, while preserving the thematic strengths of former Regional Bureaus. For example, long-standing regional expertise continues to guide key areas such as SDG 4 coordination in Latin America and the Caribbean (Santiago Office) and water governance in the Arab States (Cairo Office).

B. Strengthened Decentralization and Institutional Accountability

11. The reform has supported more effective decentralization by strengthening the role of Regional Offices as leadership hubs for programmatic and administrative support with agile guidance and tailored assistance from Headquarters. This has been particularly evident in crisis-affected contexts where the newly established Crisis Response and Preparedness Section in PAX has provided technical backstopping and expertise to National and Regional Offices covering conflict-affected countries. This included support to partnerships, surge cross sectoral institutional and human capacity to address crisis impact. The Section also supports the design and implementation of multisectoral programs, facilitates dedicated task forces involving field offices and central services, informs the development of financial partnerships, and contributes to reinforcing UNESCO's coherent positioning within Country Teams as well as to enforcing fast track administrative and financial procedures for crisis response.

12. At the same time, efforts to clarify institutional accountability have advanced through the development of an overarching Accountability Policy Framework, which is aligned with the 2023 UN JIU recommendations. While this work is ongoing, the planned introduction of Accountability Compacts and Matrices is expected to translate policy into practical guidance tailored to the field context. These instruments will support clearer role definitions and risk mitigation mechanisms, enhancing the transparency and effectiveness of decentralized operations. A key lesson learned is the need to fast-track the finalization of these instruments to ensure consistency in role definition, compliance, and risk management across the network.

C. UN System Engagement and Coordination

13. UNESCO has made measurable progress in enhancing its contribution to UN coordination mechanisms. As of January 2025, the Organization was involved in 117 UN Country Teams and contributed to 111 UN Cooperation Frameworks, including in countries where it operates without a physical presence. This represents a notable increase in field-level engagement within the UN system and reflects growing recognition of UNESCO's contributions in key areas such as strategic support to education systems, digital transformation, peacebuilding and the recognition of culture as an enabler for economic recovery. However, constraints in staffing and financing resulted in a phased implementation of the recruitment of UN Coordination Officer posts with two (Dakar and Bangkok) of the five positions foreseen under the 42 C/5 filled. Strategic deployment of coordination capacities remains a priority.

D. Programmatic Contribution to UN Reform

14. UNESCO contributed substantively to joint initiatives across regions:

- Co-leading the Environment and Climate Change Coalition in Europe and Central Asia;
- Supporting climate resilience and education policy in Latin America;
- Engaging in peacebuilding, water, and digital transformation in Africa;
- Advancing AI readiness and ocean literacy in Asia-Pacific;
- Leading education recovery efforts and policy dialogues in the Arab States.

E. Capacity Strengthening and Resource Mobilization

15. As of June 2025, 31 of the 71 additional posts created under document 42 C/5 (i.e. 60 new posts and 11 existing vacant posts that were reprofiled) had been filled and the recruitment process was underway for 9 of them (i.e. 56% of the posts were either filled or under recruitment). In light of the cost savings measures in place since March 2025 in response to the financial uncertainty faced by the Organization, the recruitment of the remaining posts has been reorganized according to sequential phases.

16. Overall, UNESCO's field workforce was strengthened during the reorganization of the field network. Between 2018 and 2025, the total number of posts and contracts in field offices increased from 1,475 to 2,010, representing a 36% overall increase. This growth was driven by a 12% rise in Regular Programme (RP) established posts and a significant 55% increase in other RP/Voluntary Contribution (VC)-funded contracts.

17. As proposed in the optimal structure of field offices, transversal functions were to be established to reinforce the regional offices' expertise. Although these functions were not budgeted under the 42 C/5, alternative solutions have been implemented to provide support in the field of partnership development and monitoring and evaluation. In this regard, BSP has continued to **strengthen field offices' resource mobilization efforts** through strategic support including seed funding. As of end of 2024, approximately $2 million had been invested across 26 field offices (13 regional offices and 13 country offices) to strengthen decentralized resource mobilization, either through dedicated expertise or targeted support provided via seed funding requests. The return on investment from these initiatives is expected to materialize during 2025, as implementation timelines align with the strategic objectives of the biennium. By December 2024, the field offices that received seed funding or decentralized resource mobilization support reported having directly mobilized at least $173 million.

18. As part of an initiative to establish a **more effective decentralized evaluation system in UNESCO**, IOS has recruited in December 2024 five Regional Evaluation Associates under an agreement with the United Nations Volunteers, based in Bangkok, Dakar, Doha, Montevideo and Nairobi Regional Offices. The Regional Evaluation Associates support the UNESCO Evaluation Office in strengthening the decentralized evaluation system and evaluation capacity development and promote the use of evaluations and UN coordination on evaluation. They provide evaluation support to all Regional Offices, National Offices and Liaison Offices in the respective geographic region. This process is funded by the 3% evaluation contribution currently allocated to IOS as part of the regular programme (42 C/5).

19. The field offices also benefited from a reinforced oversight through the IOS Field Office Strategy (2022-2026), which aims to increase the frequency of field audits and reach full coverage of the network within five years. As of 30 June 2025, approximately 70% coverage was achieved. A consistent finding of field offices audit reports over the years has been the inadequate workforce planning, with a significant impact on the operational performance of field offices. This underscores the need for better alignment between available resources and field-level needs. The recently published Report of the 2024-25 Assessment of UNESCO conducted by the Multilateral Organization

Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) has echoed the importance of ensuring that the field office network will be effectively resourced and managed and equipped with the necessary policies.

20.   To respond to field offices' audit findings on control environments, partial adjustments to the Administrative Unit structures and grades were made. Four regional offices with UN coordination responsibilities have been strengthened with the hiring of one Senior Operations Officer per office (Bangkok, Beirut, Dakar and Santiago) and for some but not all offices with additional support staff in procurement, finance and human resources expertise.

21.   In the context of the implementation of the HR Strategy for 2023-2027, **Strategic Workforce Planning guidelines** were developed and issued in October 2024 to sectors, bureaux and field offices. The guidelines encompass key HR principles and provide a structured, forward-looking approach to workforce analysis, aligning organizational structures with Field Network Reform objectives, and optimizing staffing models and other HR processes. Full implementation of some of the Workforce Planning principles, in particular the implementation of desired structures at Field Office level and the regularization of certain long-standing temporary and affiliate contract arrangements remains, however, contingent on budgetary considerations.

F.   Multilateral Engagement through Liaison Offices

22.   UNESCO's Liaison Offices have played a key role in deepening institutional engagement in multilateral and regional platforms. Between 2023 and mid-2025 Offices significantly enhanced UNESCO's visibility and partnerships:

- The **Brussels Office** has contributed to increased visibility and new partnerships with the EU, particularly around digital transformation, education, and culture.

- The **New York Office** has positioned UNESCO's priorities within intergovernmental processes such as the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact, while also advancing thematic leadership in areas such as AI ethics and freedom of expression.

- The **Addis Ababa Office** has expanded UNESCO's strategic role with the African Union, notably during the 2024 Year of Education, and in STI and media development.

- The **Geneva Office** has increased UNESCO's engagement in human rights fora and Geneva-based agencies, helping ensure the Organization's contributions are reflected in broader policy discussions.

G.   Regional and Country Strategies and Field-Headquarters Communication

23.   Efforts to strengthen collaboration between Headquarters and field offices continued throughout the biennium. Monthly online information meetings were organized, focusing on priority issues and promoting knowledge sharing, alignment, and the identification of best practices. In total, ten meetings were held in 2024, and 12 took place between January and July 2025. Topics included human resources, culture in emergencies, the 43 C/5, communication in the field, resource mobilization, MONDIACULT, and the Organization's financial situation.

24.   The need to systematize an approach to field office programmatic strategies was raised by several audits and evaluations. BSP engaged in advice, support, and learning dialogues with field offices developing UNESCO Country or Regional Strategies in coordination with programme sectors, aligned with the UNDS planning cycle to the extent possible. Good practices as well as gaps were identified, informing guidelines for the elaboration and validation of UNESCO's Country, Regional, and Liaison Strategies. Related guidelines are expected to enhance the coherence of UNESCO's work in the field and provide alignment with both UNESCO's statutory planning and regional and country priorities. They will become mandatory starting from 2026, with the expectation that before the end of 2029, all field offices will have a validated strategy.

IV. Lessons Learned

25. Implementation of the field strategy has highlighted several key lessons:

- **Inclusive consultation is critical**: Continuous engagement with Member States was essential to shaping a structure that reflects regional and sub-regional priorities. Future adjustments must maintain this inclusive and iterative approach.

- **Clarity of roles requires operational tools:** The rollout of the Accountability Framework must be accelerated. The timely finalization and deployment of Accountability Compacts and Matrices is essential to support accountability, clarify roles, and manage delegated responsibilities.

- **Transversal functions must be sustained**: Temporary solutions have partially bridged gaps in evaluation, resource mobilization and partnerships. However, sustainable investment in these functions and others such as gender focal points, is vital for long-term decentralization.

- **Data and evidence must drive adaptation**: Continued efforts to track staffing trends, resource flows, and programmatic outcomes across the field network will be essential to guide strategic decisions and inform further adjustments.

Proposed draft decision

26. In light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 35 C/Resolution 82, 206 EX/5.II.A, 209 EX/Decision 5.II.B, 210 EX/Decision 5.III.B, 212 EX/Decision 5.III.C, 215 EX/Decision 5.III.A, 216 EX/Decision 5.II.D, 217 EX/Decision 4.III, 220 EX/Decision 36, 220 EX/Decision 5.III.B and 221 EX/Decision 5.II.C,

2. Having examined document 222 EX/4.III.C,

3. Takes note of progress made in the implementation of Phase II of the overall strategy for UNESCO's presence in the world and notes the challenges, particularly budgetary, which have limited full implementation of the strategy;

4. Encourages the Director-General to pursue, to the extent possible and in line with the existing resources, the finalization of the initial objectives of the overall strategy for UNESCO's presence in the world, including by exploring alternative partnerships to reinforce field capacities, in particular for transversal functions;

5. Requests the Director-General to report to it at its 225th session on the status of the field network.