



**CONVENTION ON
MIGRATORY
SPECIES**

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**OVERVIEW OF ACCREDITATION SCHEMES FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS)**

(Prepared by the Secretariat)

Summary:

The document presents an overview of accreditation schemes for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by United Nations (UN) organizations, UN conventions and other multilateral environmental agreements.

This document is linked to UNEP/CMS/COP15/Doc.18.1 *Synergies and Partnerships* and responds to Decision 14.10 *Participation of Non-Governmental Organizations and Other Groups in CMS Processes*, which requests the Secretariat to explore options for a special accreditation scheme for NGO partners to CMS. This document aims to support any Decision on this matter.

OVERVIEW OF ACCREDITATION SCHEMES FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOS)

United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Purpose:

ECOSOC accreditation grants NGOs **consultative status** within the UN system: broader access to UN meetings (without voting rights) and documents, and occasional invitations to UN conferences beyond environmental forums.

NB: Some international organizations that do not have their own NGO accreditation system rely on the ECOSOC scheme.

Criteria:

- Work must be relevant to that of ECOSOC
- Transparent and democratic decision-making mechanism and democratically adopted constitution
- Established headquarters with an executive officer
- In existence for at least two years
- Authority to speak for members
- Representative structure
- Appropriate accountability mechanisms
- Must provide financial statements to the **Committee on NGOs** (ECOSOC body responsible for granting consultative status to NGOs), including contributions and other support, and expenses, direct or indirect

Categories:

- **General:** broad expertise covering many ECOSOC agenda areas. This status is given to NGOs that represent large segments of societies in several countries. Their area of work covers most of the issues on the agenda of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. These tend to be fairly large, well-established international NGOs with a broad geographical reach.
- **Special:** specific expertise in a limited area. This status is reserved for NGOs that have a special competence in, and are concerned specifically with, only a few of the fields of activity covered by ECOSOC. These NGOs tend to be smaller and more recently established.
- **Roster:** technical/specialized NGOs or previously accredited bodies. This status is conferred on NGOs that have a narrower and/or technical focus and that make occasional and useful contributions to the work of ECOSOC or its subsidiary bodies.

Process:

1. Submit an online application to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA – UN Secretariat) which includes a questionnaire and supporting documentation
2. Screening by NGO Branch
3. Review and recommendation by the ECOSOC **Committee on NGOs**
4. Final decision at ECOSOC substantive session

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

Purpose:

UNEP accreditation allows NGOs to participate as **observers** in the **UN Environment Assembly** (UNEA) and subsidiary bodies such as the Committee of Permanent Representatives, contribute oral/written input, attend stakeholder forums and organize side events.

NB: Accreditation is not a requirement for implementing projects, programmes or partnerships with UNEP, or for participating in regional meetings and the Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum preceding the UNEA.

Criteria:

- Non-profit, non-governmental entity
- International scope of work
- Legal existence in at least one country. Accredited NGOs must submit proof of existence and activities to the UNEP Secretariat at least every four years and inform the UNEP Secretariat of any changes in contact information or legal status
- Environmental/sustainable development interest
- Operating for at least two years

Process:

1. Register via UNEP Accreditation Portal
2. Submit documents (constitution/charter and/or statutes/by-laws, proof of non-profit status, engagement evidence)
3. UNEP Civil Society Unit review
4. Recommendation to Secretariat of Governing Bodies
5. Decision by Secretariat

Accredited NGOs are listed and can participate at UNEA. Processing typically takes around six months.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Purpose:

Accreditation allows NGOs to contribute to UNESCO's objectives and to:

- Advise and collaborate on UNESCO programmes and policies
- Implement joint projects
- Participate in meetings, consultations and global initiatives

Types:

- **Consultative status:** for NGOs active in UNESCO's fields of competence.
- **Associate status:** for international or regional organizations that have had a consultative status for at least two years and have made major contributions to UNESCO programmes.

Criteria:

- Non-profit, independent and non-governmental
- Operate internationally or regionally with recognized legal status
- Objectives and activities aligned with UNESCO's mandate
- Demonstrate competence, expertise and a record of achievement in relevant fields
- Transparent governance and sound financial management

Process:

1. Submit an application to UNESCO's Secretariat for Partnerships (using the official form; including statutes, activity reports, financial statements, etc.)
2. UNESCO Secretariat reviews the NGO's legal status, competence and relevance
3. Director-General makes a recommendation to the UNESCO Executive Board
4. Executive Board decides on accreditation or renewal (valid typically for 6 years)

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

Purpose:

UNCCD accreditation engages **civil society organizations** (CSOs/NGOs) as **observers** in the official sessions of its Conference of the Parties (COP) and its subsidiary bodies. They are able to make statements, organize side events and hold exhibits, but do not hold voting rights.

The UNCCD CSO panel, created by the COP with CSO representatives, aims to facilitate coordination, communication and collaboration among the accredited CSOs.

Criteria:

- Demonstrate relevance to desertification, land degradation and drought
- Provide evidence of legal status, mandate and activities related to UNCCD goals

Process:

1. Submit application to UNCCD Secretariat (accreditation form accompanied by constitution/charter and/or statutes/by-laws, proof of non-profit status, engagement evidence, financial statement, list of donors and affiliations)
2. Secretariat evaluates eligibility
3. Executive Secretary prepares a list recommending accreditation to COP
4. COP formally accredits organizations

Status must be renewed typically every five years.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

Purpose:

Accreditation enables NGOs to attend UNFCCC meetings (COP and its subsidiary bodies) as **admitted observer organizations**. NGOs can contribute to climate policy and negotiations, but do not hold voting rights.

Criteria:

- Legally constituted, non-profit, non-governmental organization
- Demonstrated relevance to/competence in areas relevant to climate change
- Must provide required documents via Online Admission System

Process:

1. Submit application and documentation (constitution/charter and/or statutes/by-laws, proof of non-profit status, engagement evidence, financial statement, list of donors and affiliations) through **UNFCCC Online Admission System**
2. Secretariat reviews against eligibility criteria
3. Secretariat recommends eligible NGOs to COP Bureau for **provisional admission** for immediate participation
4. Formal **admission** by COP under agenda item

Once admitted, NGOs must register representatives for each meeting.

Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)
Purpose:

Accreditation supports NGO **participation, as observers, in meetings of the CMS COP and subsidiary bodies**. They can contribute technical expertise on migratory species conservation, but do not hold voting rights.

Criteria

- Demonstrated qualification/competence in protection, conservation and management of migratory species
- Legal NGO status
- NGO contact and representative details

Process:

CMS accreditation for NGOs **is not a formal scheme** like that of ECOSOC or UNEP; rather, it is based on general MEA practice, which is subject to procedural rules and Party consent:

1. Inform the CMS Secretariat with supporting information and register for the meeting (organization mandate, proposed representatives)
2. Secretariat acknowledges, compiles list of observers and submits it to Parties
3. Objections by Parties can block admission under procedural rules

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
Purpose:

Accreditation enables NGOs with relevant expertise in biodiversity to attend and participate as **observers** at COPs and subsidiary body meetings, but without voting rights.

Criteria:

- Demonstrated qualification/competence in fields relating to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity
- Legal NGO status with statutes/by-laws

- NGO contact and representative details

Process:

1. Send an **official letter of interest** to the CBD Secretariat, with supporting information (organization mandate, qualifications, by-laws, proposed representatives)
2. Secretariat acknowledges and circulates these to Parties
3. Objections by Parties can block admission under procedural rules

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

Purpose:

Accreditation provides NGOs a seat at CITES **COP meetings** and committee sessions as **observers** to monitor proceedings and contribute expertise, but without voting rights.

NB: The Secretariat charges a **registration fee** for approved observers.

Criteria:

- Technically qualified in wildlife/fauna/flora protection, conservation or management
- Legal NGO status, clear mission, by-laws, membership
- List of intended representatives

Process:

1. Submit applications with supporting documents either to the CITES Secretariat or, for national NGOs, to the national CITES Management Authority
2. Secretariat reviews and grants observer status (usually announced months ahead of COP)

International Whaling Commission (IWC)

Purpose:

Accreditation allows NGOs to **attend meetings as observers**, without voting rights.

NB: The Commission levies a **registration fee** and may define other conditions for the attendance of such observers.

Criteria:

NGOs must express interest and have relevant expertise in species conservation issues (follows general MEA practice).

Process:

1. Written application submitted at least 60 days before meetings
2. Standard application form with organizational details
3. Upon approval, the NGO remains accredited until revoked
4. Observers can attend plenary and committee sessions, subject to seating and procedural conditions

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Purpose:

Accreditation supports NGO **participation at Ramsar COP meetings as observers**, enabling them to contribute technical expertise on wetlands and sustainable use, without voting rights.

Criteria & Process:

Similar to CMS, Ramsar's accreditation for NGOs **is not a formal scheme** like that of ECOSOC or UNEP; rather, it is based on general MEA practice, which is subject to procedural rules and Party consent. Observer NGOs must show interest and be qualified in fields relating to the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands,

International Organization Partners (IOPs)

In addition, Ramsar formally recognizes specific international NGOs as International Organization Partners (IOPs). These organizations provide technical, scientific and field-level support to the Convention. To date, six have been designated. This status allows them to:

- help identify ongoing and emerging issues
- work with the Convention bodies and, where possible, with Contracting Parties to support national implementation of the Convention, as well as collaborate with each other to further the goals of the partnership
- meet with the Secretariat annually face-to-face and communicate regularly
- liaise with the Secretariat through a designated focal point
- participate as observers and advisers in all activities of the Convention
- where relevant, work as partners in project development and implementation

Their role is therefore not limited to taking part in meetings; they are also actively engaged in the work of the Convention.

Criteria for IOPs:

1. Programme of activities that is global or at least covers many countries in one or more regions of the world.
2. Statement of purpose that explicitly, or by clear implication, includes the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands.
3. Track record of providing support to and/or implementing on-the-ground projects that contribute to wetland conservation and sustainable use.
4. Demonstrated experience in implementing partnership ventures such as training and education, technical and/or scientific expertise, policy development, and/or evaluation and assessment, particularly where such ventures would bring new and additional benefits to the Ramsar partnership.
5. Positive reputation for being willing and able to cooperate with national and international bodies, including both governmental and non-governmental organizations.
6. Readiness to actively contribute on a regular basis to the further development of the policies and tools of the Convention on Wetlands and their application on the ground, particularly by assisting Contracting Parties to meet their obligations under the Convention.

7. Willingness to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Bureau of the Convention, with a partnership agreement that is spelled out fully.

Process for IOPs:

1. Formal request presenting an application to the Convention's Bureau for its inclusion in the agenda of the next meeting of the Standing Committee
2. Parties approve (or disapprove) through a COP Decision

Comparative Overview

| Body | Type of Status | Purpose | Core Criteria | Application Process | Decision Authority | Duration / Renewal |
|--|---|---|--|--|---|--|
| United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) | Consultative Status (General, Special, Roster) | Broad UN system engagement; access to meetings, submissions, side events | Non-profit; democratic governance; ≥2 years existence; financial transparency | Online application → NGO Branch screening → Committee on NGOs review → ECOSOC decision | ECOSOC (based on Committee recommendation) | Quadrennial reporting required to maintain status |
| United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) | Accredited NGO (Observer) | Participation in UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), submit statements, attend sessions & side events | Non-profit; legal status; environmental mandate; ≥2 years operation; international scope | Apply via UNEP portal → Secretariat review → approval | UNEP Secretariat (Secretariat of Governing Bodies) | Ongoing; remains unless withdrawn |
| United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) | Accredited NGO (Partnership with UNESCO's broad mandate - Consultative or Associate Status) | Contribute to UNESCO's objectives in education, science, culture, communication and information | Legal NGO; mandate aligned with UNESCO goals; demonstrated competence and independence | Submit application to Director General → review by Secretariat → recommendation by Committee → approval by Executive Board | Executive Board (based on Committee recommendation) | Formal renewal typically every 6 years |
| United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) | Accredited CSO (Observer) | Participate in COP & implementation review; civil society engagement | Legal status; mandate aligned with desertification/land issues | Apply to Secretariat → review → list submitted to COP → COP decision | COP (on Secretariat recommendation) | Formal renewal typically every 5 years |
| United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) | Admitted Observer Organization | Attend COP, subsidiary body sessions; submit statements | Legally constituted; non-profit; climate relevance; documentation via online system | Online application → Secretariat review → provisional admission by Bureau → formal COP admission | COP (after Bureau recommendation) | Continuing status; representatives register per meeting |
| Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) | Observer | Participate in COP & subsidiary bodies; provide expertise | Relevant expertise; NGO status | Notify/register for COP/& subsidiary bodies | CMS Secretariat / Parties | Generally meeting-based |
| Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) | Observer | Attend COP & subsidiary bodies; provide expertise | Competence in biodiversity; legal NGO status; statutes; relevant work | Submit letter & documents to Secretariat → circulated to Parties → no objection | CBD Secretariat (subject to Party objection) | Meeting-based recognition (generally continuing participation) |
| Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) | Observer | Attend COP & committees; technical input on wildlife trade | Technically qualified in fauna/flora conservation; legal status; by-laws | Apply to Secretariat or national authority → review → admission | CITES Secretariat (with Party procedures) | Typically meeting-based; may reapply per COP |
| International Whaling Commission (IWC) | Observer | Attend plenary & committee meetings | Non-profit status; marine/whale conservation interest | Submit application ≥60 days before meeting → Secretariat approval | IWC Secretariat | Remains accredited unless revoked |
| Ramsar Convention on Wetlands | Observer | Participate in COP on wetlands conservation | Relevant expertise in wetlands; NGO status | Notify/seek recognition via Secretariat prior to COP | Ramsar Secretariat / Parties | Generally meeting-based |