

IUCN Programme Accountability Explained

This note explains the logic underpinning the design of the IUCN Programme 2026–2029 accountability framework and the rationale for key design choices. It complements the Programme document and supports consistent interpretation of the framework. It should be read in conjunction with the Programme document (Section 6 and Annexes 1 and 2).

Procedural details on reporting, quality assurance and limitations are provided in the companion ‘Technical note: Reporting basis, quality assurance and limitations’.

The current approach reflects both deliberate strategic choices and the practical realities of IUCN’s operating model. In some areas, design decisions were made purposefully to strengthen accountability and learning. In others, the framework acknowledges institutional complexity and structural constraints and seeks to work constructively within them rather than impose artificial simplifications.

Operating model and accountability approach

Unlike organisations operating on a strictly needs-based planning model, where country offices define targets based on prior needs assessments, often several months in advance, IUCN operates largely on a rolling Programme portfolio basis. As such, the Union’s impact is driven by:

- A dynamic and evolving global project portfolio; and
- The expert-led work of the Commission and Committees

Both dimensions are inherently fluid and not fully predictable over a multi-year horizon. As a result, fixed long-term numeric targets at all levels of the Programme are neither realistic nor always meaningful.

To address this, IUCN has adopted a more agile accountability framework. Following recommendations from the External Review, the Programme performance management system is structured around a Theory of Change (ToC) construct.

The ToC serves as the conceptual “compass” of the Programme. Performance will be assessed by mapping progress against the logical pathways articulated in the Programme document (including Annex 1 and the visual representation of the ToC). This enables IUCN to report on its “results story”:

- Quantitatively (what was delivered or achieved); and
- Qualitatively (IUCN’s specific contribution, particularly where results are indirect or shared).

This approach is particularly important for results that fall within the spheres of influence and interest.

Design Choices by Results Level

Impact level (sphere of interest)

At the Impact level, IUCN does not monitor its own performance. These results are considered too remote from IUCN’s direct action and influence to attribute performance credibly.

Global environmental and societal trends may indicate whether broader change is occurring. However, IUCN does not attempt to directly link or measure its institutional performance against those global impacts.

Outcome level (sphere of influence)

Outcomes reflect changes that depend on IUCN’s reach and effectiveness in working with and through stakeholders.

Core indicators at this level are designed to tell the “results story” by:

- Capturing direct results where attribution is clearer; and
- Articulating IUCN’s contribution where outcomes are more indirect or shared.

At present, fixed multi-year targets are not systematically applied at this level. This decision reflects structural design constraints linked to the rolling nature of the Programme portfolio. Over time, the framework may evolve toward more structured target-setting as feasibility improves.

Output level (sphere of control)

Outputs represent the sphere where IUCN has the highest degree of control.

Targets are established at this level. These correspond to the “green boxes” under each Output in the Programme document. Annual planning processes of IUCN Constituents are aligned to identify collective delivery commitments on these.

For each year:

- A clear delivery intention is defined in the IUCN workplan;
- Progress is tracked through an implementation marker; and
- Achievement is explained through accompanying narrative reporting in the Annual Report.

This ensures clarity of accountability where IUCN has direct operational control.

Catalytic roles (sphere of control)

Catalytic role indicators capture how IUCN operates and tell the “volume story” of its engagement, knowledge generation, convening power, policy influence, and resource mobilisation.

Because these indicators are largely Programme portfolio-driven, establishing meaningful annual or four-year numeric targets is generally not feasible. Instead:

- Trends are monitored over time;
- Data are analysed to understand delivery modalities; and

- Adjustments are made where necessary to optimise performance.

The emphasis here is adaptive management rather than fixed output commitments.

Resolutions and Recommendations

Each Resolution or Recommendation adopted by the World Conservation Congress represents, in principle, a target in itself.

Given their number and diversity, simultaneous delivery on all items is neither practical nor realistic. IUCN therefore applies an item-based planning and monitoring approach.

Each year:

- A baseline of selected items is established;
- A defined set of items is prioritised; and
- End-of-year delivery expectations are clarified for those selected items.

This approach ensures structured progress without overextending institutional capacity.

Contributions for Nature (union-level footprint)

The Contributions for Nature framework captures the collective work of the Union, including Members.

As with the broader Programme portfolio, static targets at this level are not meaningful due to the voluntary and distributed nature of contributions. However, the framework plays an essential role in:

- Tracking the Union’s collective footprint;
- Monitoring directional trends; and
- Assessing whether delivery is aligned with Programme ambitions.

Overall assurance logic

While IUCN has limited control over the long-term “volume” of its Programme portfolio, the annual planning and monitoring cycle ensures that the Union does not operate without defined baselines and delivery commitments within its sphere of control.

In addition, a dedicated envelope for evaluative work is maintained. When effectively deployed, this provides an additional layer of assurance regarding Programme delivery and institutional effectiveness.

The future External Review will also be designed to assess this logic and provide assurance on its effectiveness.

Confidence in the framework

The accountability framework is designed to:

- Respond substantively to the recommendations of the External Review;
- Provide sufficient assurance on Programme delivery, even in the absence of targets at every level; and

- Allow for iterative improvement from one reporting cycle to the next.