

IADC at 30: The work of the IADC in tackling the challenges of attaining sustainability in the space environment

The discussion at the 61st session of UN COPUOS Scientific and Technical Subcommittee in 2024 addressed the issue of space debris and the long-term sustainability of outer-space activities through Agenda items 6 and 11. Historically, the work of the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC) has proven to be a reliable source for reflections in this context.

On the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the IADC, the European Space Policy Institute (ESPI) and the UK Space Agency (UKSA) took the opportunity to foster an exchange of views on existing national and multilateral efforts to preserve the space environment in light of the past, current and future work of the IADC.

Based on the discussions and interventions, the following Key Takeaways were identified by the organisers:

1. Reinforcing and expanding IADC mission

IADC's mission is to provide a forum for the coordination and cooperation of space agencies and to conduct research in the field of debris mitigation. The collection and dissemination of Space Situational Awareness (SSA) data, as well as the identification of the actual mission of specific satellites, are not in IADC's mandate.



However, it was emphasised that the IADC continues to have an important role in anticipating the impacts of new activities on the space debris environment such as the proliferation of small satellites, deployment of constellations.

2. Driving the implementation of the IADC Guidelines

The Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines issued by the Committee in 2002, and subsequently updated, swiftly became soft law, sometimes leading to their incorporation into national regulatory frameworks. Widespread adoption continues to be the most effective method to reduce the long-term environmental impacts of space activity. However, adoption of the IADC space debris mitigation guidelines is not yet at a sufficient level to induce substantial slowing of the population growth.



The panel stressed the importance of international outreach, including through the UN COPUOS, and capacity building. This effort is not only aimed at new entrants in the space sector but includes established satellite operators. Different approaches are being explored within national regulatory frameworks to promote compliance with the Guidelines, including relying on insurance means to incentivise space sustainability best practices. Eventually, compliance with the Guidelines will be increasingly facilitated by their broader implementation, with the establishment of a virtuous circle.

3. Who pays the bill for the implementation of the Guidelines?

IADC members foster the development of technologies supporting space sustainability via their national and regional programmes. In particular, these technologies are aimed at facilitating the implementation of the Guidelines, as well as other measures in support of space sustainability.



On the other end, should the Guidelines be enforced, they could in turn stimulate the uptake of these technologies.

4. Industry and the IADC in an evolving environment

In recent years, a significant proliferation of initiatives addressing space debris mitigation has been observed, both from the public and private actors. While the industry increasingly plays a crucial role in this realm, its involvement within the IADC remains quite limited.



Indeed, the IADC members are currently exclusively space agencies; delegations are only comprised of representatives of Governments and academics institutions. Nevertheless, as highlighted during the Event, the Committee has never operated in isolation. In particular, IADC members' delegations bring insights from their national environments, including the industrial ecosystems, which contribute to the IADC's work and perspectives.

5. Increasing interest in the IADC by a wider range of stakeholders

Since its creation, the IADC has seen a consistent increase in membership. Initially consisting of four delegations in 1993, the Committee has now expanded to include thirteen members. To accommodate a sharp increase in membership requests, an observer status was introduced.



Moreover, in response to the growing interest from other space agencies and the increasing demands to join the organisation, the IADC is exploring the establishment of a new status of Associate Member in the near-term. The associate status will enable new actors to gradually develop the necessary capabilities to contribute to the work of the IADC, while already partially participating in its activities.