

Future Governance Structures for Dark and Quiet Skies Discussion

Session 7: Proposals and Schedule of Preparation until STSC/COPUOS 2026

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December 2025

Where We Are Now

- COPUOS STSC unanimously agreed to include Dark and Quiet Skies on provisional agenda 2025-2029
- Five-year mandate requires defining governance mechanism post-2029
- Requires balancing multiple stakeholders: astronomy, satellite industry, diplomacy, policy
- Critical decision needed: **what institutional structure** best supports long-term implementation?

Three Structural Options for 2029+

Option A

Working Group

Formal STSC WG

Option B

Expert Group

Under LTS

Option C

Action Team

Cross-thematic
approach

Option A: Dedicated Working Group

Structure: Formal STSC Working Group (like LTS WG)

- Pros: Full autonomy; direct STSC mandate; focused agenda; legal/technical integration; long-term commitment signal
- Cons: slower decision-making; potential governance fragmentation; limited cross-committee coordination
- Historical precedent: LTS WG (2010-2026+) demonstrates effectiveness but also complexity and consensus challenges
- Best for: Comprehensive dark sky protection requiring binding policy recommendations

Option B: Expert Group Under LTS WG

Structure: Expert Group under Working Group on Long-term Sustainability

- Pros: Leverages existing LTS framework; natural sustainability fit; expert-driven; agile implementation
- Cons: Limited decision autonomy; subordinate status; sustainability-focused may miss regulatory/legal aspects; resource competition with other Expert Groups
- Historical precedent: LTS WG Expert Groups (2012-2014) worked on debris, weather, space utilization with mixed consensus outcomes
- Best for: Sustainability aspects within broader STSC agenda

Option C: Action Team (ATLAC Model)

Structure: Cross-thematic coordination team (like ATLAC for lunar governance)

- Pros: Bridges STSC-LSC; flexible agile working; rapidly responsive; multi-stakeholder coordination; innovation-friendly
- Cons: No formal legal standing; informal authority; resource dependency; coordination complexity; consensus not mandatory
- Historical precedent: ATLAC (2024+) demonstrates effectiveness for cross-cutting governance but limited binding power
- Best for: Coordinating astronomy, debris, sustainability, and legal dimensions across traditional committee boundaries

Key Decision Factors

Institutional Factors

Formal authority vs. flexibility; COPUOS precedent; governance fit

Implementation Factors

Stakeholder engagement; technical/legal coordination; capacity requirements; responsiveness

Sustainability Factors

Long-term resource commitment; cross-committee collaboration; adaptability

Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Option A: Dedicated WG	Option B: Expert Group under LTS WG	Option C: Action Team
Formal Authority	High (WG recommendations carry STSC/COPUOS weight)	Medium-Low (EG recs require WG endorsement)	Medium (reports to COPUOS but has no formal WG status)
Institutional Legitimacy	Very High	High (part of established LTS WG framework)	Medium (novel structure; model still being tested)
Technical Depth	Medium (EGs possible but not mandated)	High (specialized expert focus)	Medium to high (depends on composition)
Cross-Committee Integration	Low (not inherent in structure)	None (under STSC only)	High (designed to bridge subcommittees)
Flexibility/Agility	Low (formal procedure constraints)	Medium (more agile than full WG)	High (fewer procedural constraints)
Speed of Decision-Making	Slow (typical 5+ years for major recommendations)	Medium (expert groups: 18-24 months)	Medium-Fast (depends on consensus requirements and meeting frequency)

Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Option A: Dedicated WG	Option B: Expert Group under LTS WG	Option C: Action Team
Resource Requirements	High (requires UNOOSA secretariat support, interpretation services, annual meetings)	Medium (expert group overhead lower than full WG)	Medium (hybrid meetings reduce costs; but still requires coordination)
Stakeholder Inclusivity	Medium (primarily MS delegations)	Medium (can include non-governmental participants)	High (explicitly designed for diverse stakeholders)
Regulatory Binding Capacity	High (WG recs can form basis of binding COPUOS decisions)	Low-Medium (EG recs advisory unless WG/COPUOS formally adopts)	Low-Medium (AT recs advisory; require COPUOS vote to become binding)
Implementation Mechanisms	Moderate (depends on follow-up mechanisms; typical reliance on voluntary adoption)	Weak (advisory nature reduces implementation pressure)	Weak (advisory nature reduces implementation pressure)
Alignment with IAU CPS Policy Hub Vision	Medium (supports if expert groups added and cross-committee interface created)	Low-Medium (insufficient on its own; subordinates D&QS to sustainability agenda)	Medium-High (likes cross-cutting model; concerned about binding authority)

Next Steps: Timeline to STSC 2026

- **Dec 2025 (Workshop):** Stakeholder consensus on governance preference
- **Jan-Feb 2026:** Prepare STSC documentation and proposal
- **Feb 2026 (STSC):** Formal recommendation to establish post-2029 mechanism
- **Post-2026:** Implementation and capacity building for selected governance structure

Question: Which approach best serves dark and quiet skies?