IARC Strategic Prioritization Framework
Implementation companion to the Medium-Term Strategy 2026–2030

Executive Summary

IARC developed a Strategic Prioritization Framework to align the priority objectives of the Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) 2026–2030 with the financial realities the organization will face at the start of the new strategy period. While the **MTS reflects the level of ambition** required to address the accelerating global cancer burden, the Regular Budget is expected to remain constrained due to Zero Nominal Growth and the non-payment of contributions by some Participating States. In this context, the Agency **cannot assume that all planned activities can be implemented without clear prioritization**.

Over recent months, IARC undertook a structured, multi-step exercise to determine which scientific activities must be **protected**, which can **expand** if funding allows, and which should be **paused or phased out**. This process relied on a multicriteria decision analysis (MCDA) approach tailored to IARC's specific context. More than 40 prioritization criteria were developed by IARC Secretariat, informed by the MTS 2021–2025 evaluation, current scientific knowledge on the global cancer research and control landscape, and extensive internal and external consultations. These criteria were then ranked by the Governing Council, the Scientific Council, and WHO, with high response rates and strong convergence on key priorities. Based on these rankings, the Secretariat built weighted scoring grids, which were applied during a dedicated Senior Advisory Team (SAT) retreat in September 2025 to assess priority area across all research and support projects planned for 2026–2030.

The result is a **tiered categorization of projects** that reflects both their strategic importance and the resources required for successful delivery. This Strategic Prioritization Framework now guides internal planning, informs project development and fundraising strategies, and provides governance with a transparent understanding of what IARC can realistically implement under current and alternative funding conditions. It is therefore both a management tool and a communication tool: fostering coherent decision-making within the Agency and clarifying for Participating States how increased investment would translate into greater impact for global cancer prevention. The operational rules derived from this framework are expected to come into effect in **January 2026**.

I. Context: why a Strategic Prioritization Framework?

1. Ambition of the MTS 2026-2030 and the need for strategic choices

The MTS 2026-2030 sets out a comprehensive framework for strengthening IARC's scientific contribution to global cancer control through **three interconnected outcome-level results** that call for collective action across the global cancer community. IARC's specific role within this shared endeavour is articulated through three bold pledges: the **100% Commitments**:

- **Evidence-based policy for cancer prevention:** 100% of IARC's research outputs will be policy-relevant.
- **Global equity in cancer control:** 100% of IARC research projects will be designed with equity at their core.

- **Future preparedness:** 100% of the seven megatrends identified in the MTS 2026-2030 will be embedded into IARC's scientific work and governance.

These objectives define the scale of action required to respond to a rapidly evolving cancer landscape and to advance IARC's vision of **a world free from preventable cancers and with better outcomes for all**. However, realising this ambition requires predictable and sustained investment. Despite ongoing efficiency measures, IARC's shrinking Regular Budget is insufficient to support the full scope of activity outlined in the MTS.

Several structural challenges make prioritization unavoidable:
- **Zero Nominal Growth (ZNG)** limits the IARC's ability to adjust its operating model to inflation and rising costs.
- **Persistent arrears from some Participating States** reduce the actual resources available each year.
- **Increasing dependence on extrabudgetary funding** places pressure on Regular Budget-funded capacities that are essential to maintain scientific independence and quality.
- **Limited visibility on future contributions** makes forward planning difficult, particularly for large multi-year initiatives.

In this environment, a transparent and evidence-based prioritization framework is essential to safeguard core scientific functions while ensuring that new or expanding areas of work proceed only when sustainably financed.

2. Purpose of the Strategic Prioritization Framework

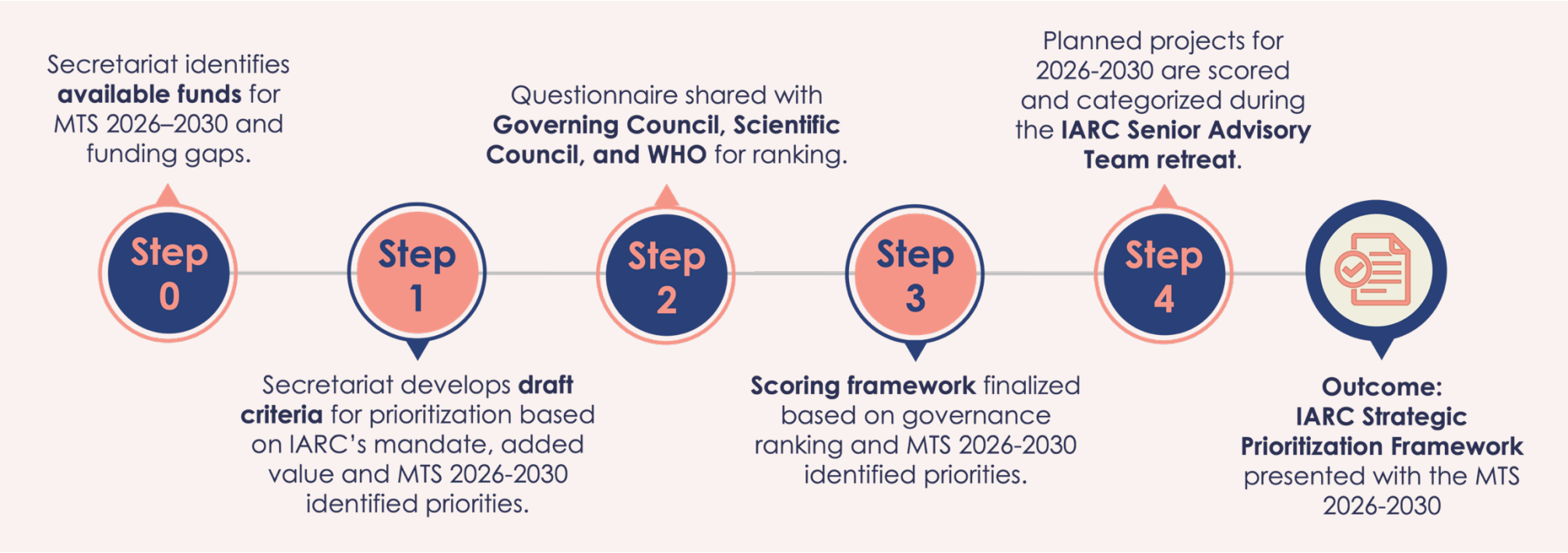
The Strategic Prioritization Framework addresses these challenges by:
- **Aligning activities with available resources** so that the MTS is implemented responsibly rather than aspirationally.
- Identifying the **essential set of activities required to preserve IARC's role** as a global scientific authority.
- Clarifying which projects **can be implemented** under current funding and which may require **rescoping or phasing out**.
- Providing a shared, **Agency-wide framework** to guide project development, resource allocation, and engagement with governance.
- Demonstrating transparently **what increased investment would unlock**, thus supporting advocacy with Participating States and partners.

This Framework is not a static plan but a tool for continuous, evidence-based prioritization over the MTS period. It ensures that IARC delivers the **greatest possible impact within its means**, while keeping the door open to expanded ambition if resources allow

II. Overview of the prioritization process

The Strategic Prioritization Framework was developed through a structured, multi-step process that unfolded between early 2025 and the SAT retreat in September 2025 and its outcomes continue to inform ongoing reflections on how best to integrate the framework throughout the MTS 2026-2030 cycle. The goal was to **integrate scientific, managerial, and governance perspectives** in a transparent and balanced manner.

IARC prioritititization process step by step



Methodology

The prioritization methodology was grounded in **multicriteria decision analysis (MCDA)**, a widely used approach for complex decision-making under resource constraints. MCDA was selected because the decisions involved require assessing a mix of criteria that cannot be easily compared and integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives. It offers a structured way to navigate this complexity. MCDA:

- ➔ Allows the simultaneous consideration of diverse scientific, strategic, and operational criteria
- ➔ Provides transparent and reproducible scoring
- ➔ Integrates governance values with evidence-based institutional priorities;
- ➔ Supports decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

While inspired by external models, IARC adapted MCDA to its own mandate, scientific context and institutional culture. As a non–donor-driven organization, IARC ensured that the definition of prioritization criteria remained fully internal and grounded in evidence. Governance bodies were invited to rank these predefined criteria, after which the process returned to an evidence-based, peer-review approach: the IARC Senior Advisory Team (SAT) conducted the assessments collectively, ensuring consistency, transparency, and strong institutional ownership at all levels.

1. Phase 1 – Definition of Criteria

IARC Secretariat developed a comprehensive set of prioritization criteria informed by:

- ➔ The evaluation of the MTS 2021–2025.
- ➔ Peer-reviewed analyses of global cancer research needs.
- ➔ Inputs from high-level external stakeholders through structure interviews.
- ➔ Internal consultations with scientists and technical staff through surveys, interviews, and workshops.

Over 40 criteria were identified and organized into four major categories:

- ➔ **IARC's distinctive strengths and contribution to global public goods**
- ➔ **Alignment with MTS 2026-2030 outcome-level results and priority research areas**
- ➔ **Cross-cutting strategic priorities**
- ➔ **Operational considerations and feasibility**

2. Phase 2 – Governance consultation and ranking

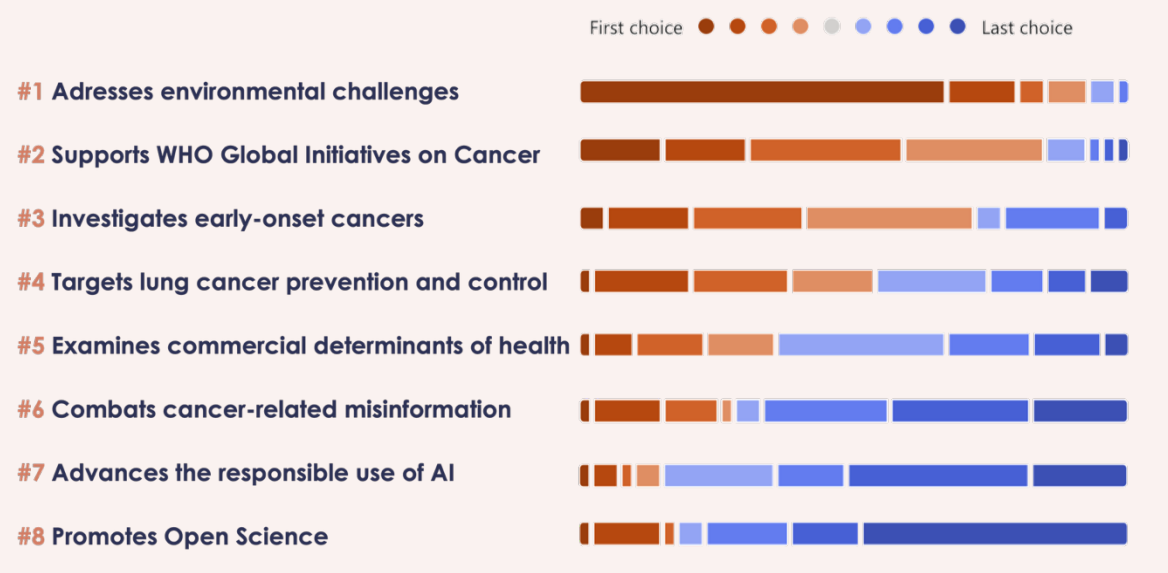
Criteria were shared with the Scientific Council (SC), the Governing Council (GC), and WHO during summer 2025. The consultation yielded strong engagement (96% SC participation, 43% GC), with the following results:

- ➔ **Alignment with IARC's core mandate** – Governance bodies were asked to rank the modes of engagement – from the highest to the lowest priority - defined in the MTS 2026-2030 (*see page 2 of the Executive Summary*) according to their relevance to IARC's mission and their unique added value to global cancer prevention:

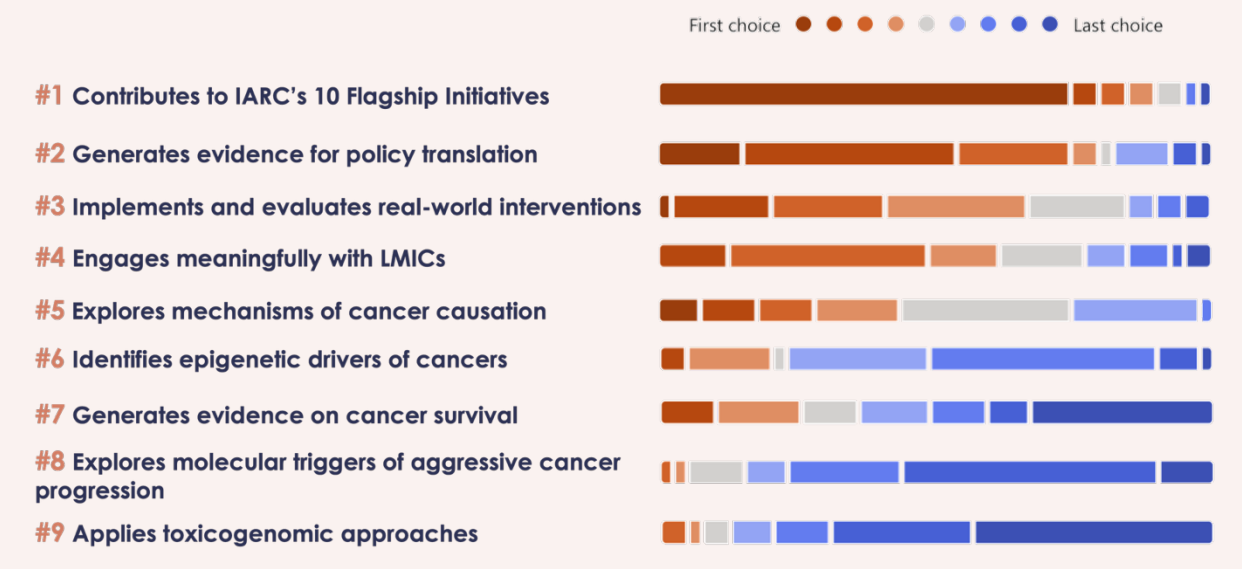
#1: IARC is a... **Global cancer data compass,** producing authoritative global cancer statistics to guide cancer control.
#2: IARC is an... **Independent authority on cancer risks,** delivering trusted, impartial evaluations of carcinogens through the IARC Monographs and related assessments.

#3: IARC is a... **Catalyst for global collaboration,** convening multidisciplinary research partnerships across countries, institutions, and sectors to tackle cancer together.
#4: IARC is an... **Instrument of Science Diplomacy,** promoting peaceful international cooperation through neutral, science-based collaboration and capacity-building.
#5: IARC is a... **Knowledge translation hub,** converting scientific findings into actionable tools and guidance for public health decision-making.
#6: IARC is a... **Laboratory of innovation,** driving discovery and early-stage research to uncover cancer causes and new prevention methods.
#7: IARC is a... **Curator of trusted knowledge,** maintaining essential reference resources like Blue Books and Handbooks.
#8: IARC is a... **Builder of capacity and resilience,** strengthening national systems, especially in LMICs, through training, technical support, and institutional development.

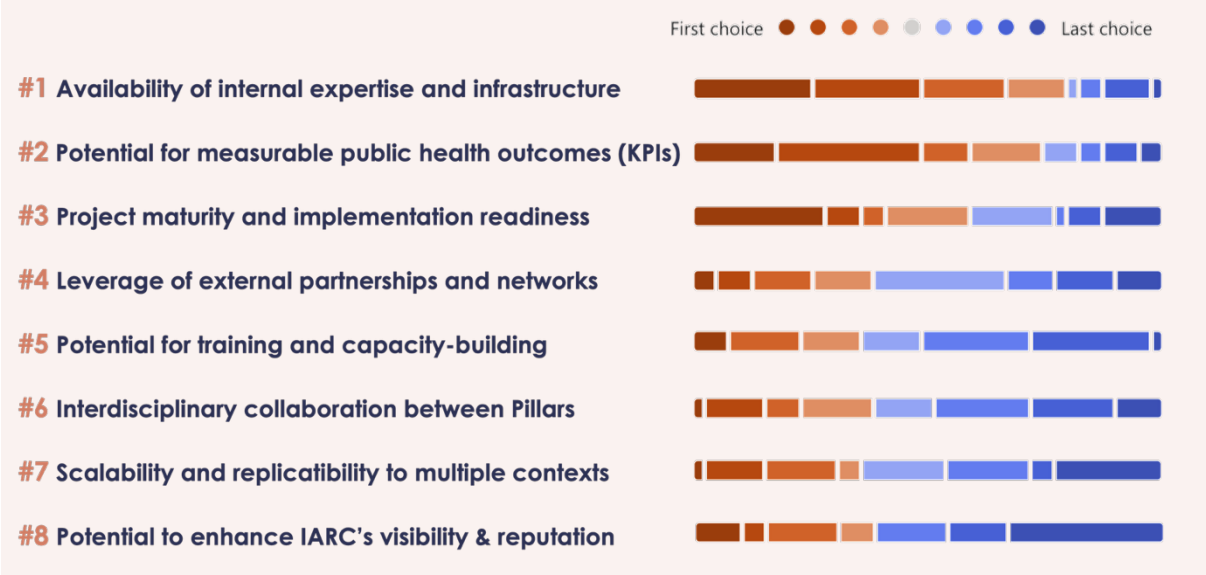
➔ **Strategic relevance -** Governance bodies were asked to rank the scientific features below by their relevance to IARC's future priorities.



➔ **Cross-cutting strategic priorities** - Governance bodies were asked to rank the following cross-cutting themes based on their importance for advancing IARC's mission and responding to emerging global cancer challenges. The proposed project:



➔ **Enabling and operational considerations -** Given constrained Regular Budget and growing demands on institutional infrastructure, the prioritization process explicitly considered operational feasibility. Governance bodies were asked to rank factors based on how critical they are to a project's feasibility and strategic value:



These rankings directly informed the weighting system used in the scoring grids.

3. Phase 3 – Development of the Scoring Framework

In developing the weighted scoring grids, the IARC Secretariat combined **governance expectations** with **institutional evidence**, ensuring, for example, that a strong emphasis on Low-and-Middle Income Countries (LMICs) was maintained even when governance rankings varied. The resulting framework gives greater weight to strategic and mission-critical criteria while ensuring transparency and comparability across projects. (*see Annex 2 of the MTS 2026-2030 for detailed scoring grids*).
In addition to the strengths of engagement — which define how IARC creates lasting value in the global cancer ecosystem and constituted one of the most heavily weighted criteria, with scores derived from their ranking in the governance questionnaire — one decisive criterion was introduced: ***Does the project address a challenge where IARC has unique scientific authority and added value?*** This criterion served to protect the distinctiveness of IARC's contribution. When the answer was "no," the project received a negative score and was automatically placed in the lowest tier (*see Section III: From scores to tiers*).

In light of the results, some research areas in which IARC previously had projects were deprioritized and ranked among the lowest in the scoring grids such as **toxigenomic approaches, studies on the biological mechanisms driving more aggressive tumour behaviour, research on cancer treatment and research on quality of life in cancer survivors**. It was concluded that IARC does not have a unique added value in these domains and does not have the resources required to expand its work in these areas.

Tailored scoring grids were also developed for research infrastructure, Services to Science and Research (SSR) and Director's Office activities to reflect their service-oriented nature and specific operating contexts. These adapted grids followed the same underlying logic regarding alignment with the MTS and demonstration of IARC's added value.

4. Phase 4 – SAT Retreat and project assessment

During the September 2025 two-day retreat, IARC SAT as well as Branch Heads and Deputy Branch Heads applied the scoring grids to all proposed projects for 2026–2030. The two-step process involved:

- **Branch-level self-assessment**, in which teams reviewed their project portfolios against the criteria.
- **Cross-Pillar review**, in which mixed scientific groups evaluated all projects to ensure calibration and consensus.

This **inclusive and peer-informed process** ensured that prioritization reflected both scientific expertise and Agency-wide strategic oversight. The retreat produced scored assessments and an initial tier classification for all projects.

III. From scores to tiers: the Strategic Prioritization Framework

The five tiers that emerged from the scoring framework and the SAT retreat describe the **levels of strategic importance and feasibility of all projects planned for 2026–2030**. They clarify what constitutes IARC's core scientific mission, what represents strategic growth, what should proceed only under specific conditions and what should be discontinued. Importantly, tier placement **does not reflect scientific merit**: all assessed projects meet IARC's standards of excellence.

Tier assignment was determined through a combination of factors:

- The **total weighted score from the MCDA framework**, with minimum thresholds established for each tier
- A **defined set of criteria** that projects were required to meet to be eligible for each tier
- **Feasibility assessments**, including operational and institutional considerations
- **Consensus-based deliberations** during and after the SAT retreat, with any justified recategorization subsequently reviewed and approved by the IARC Director.

1. Tier definitions

Tier 1 – Mission-critical priorities (core commitments)

Tier 1 comprises projects that are indispensable to IARC's mandate and to the Agency's role as a provider of global public goods, including the IARC Flagships. These projects:

- Represent areas where **IARC holds unique scientific authority, internationally recognised expertise, and strong influence on policy**
- **Align fully with all three MTS outcome-level results**
- Reinforce **IARC's most valued modes of engagement**, particularly global cancer data, scientific authority, and global collaboration.

Tier 1 encompasses the activities **IARC must safeguard in all resource scenarios** and, where possible, further accelerate during the MTS period.

Tier 2 – Strategic priorities (high added value):

Tier 2 includes projects that strongly support IARC's scientific strategy and significantly contribute to MTS priorities, while not being foundational to IARC's institutional identity. These projects:

- Demonstrate **high scientific relevance**, **strong alignment with IARC's mission**
- Expand IARC's impact in **priority research areas or cross-cutting themes**

- Are **feasible under current capacity** but may require additional resources to reach their full potential.

Tier 2 represents **strategic growth opportunities**: initiatives that merit targeted support and have the potential to enhance scientific visibility and global impact.

Tier 3 – Valuable initiatives (conditional implementation)

Tier 3 projects contribute meaningfully to the MTS but have a rather limited scope or narrower strategic relevance. They:

- Remain aligned with objectives but are **not central to IARC's global role**
- Have **modest visibility, narrower scientific scope, or limited potential impact**
- Produce useful outputs but **would benefit from review** to ensure efficiency and stronger alignment.

Tier 3 allows promising but less central initiatives to remain within the portfolio without compromising higher-priority work. These projects are **candidates for rescoping, consolidation, or integration into broader programmes** to maximise value and efficiency.

Tier 4 – Not strategically aligned for 2026–2030

Tier 4 includes projects that fall outside the strategic focus of the MTS or do not meet minimum thresholds for strategic fit or feasibility. These projects:

- Are **not consistent with current priorities** or represent outdated or one-off initiatives with limited future value
- Offer **minimal outputs, visibility, or policy impact**
- **Cannot be supported** by existing expertise or infrastructure.

Tier 4 projects are not prioritised for development or implementation during 2026–2030.

Tier 5 – Emerging concepts or preliminary data studies

In addition to the four main tiers, a Tier 5 category was established after the retreat to capture **early-stage ideas, exploratory concepts, and preliminary data studies that may emerge during the MTS cycle and are not fully accommodated by the existing criteria or by the current prioritization process**. These initiatives require further refinement, evidence, or strategic framing, and will therefore be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the IARC Director. Tier 5 enables the Agency to remain responsive to scientific innovation while ensuring that emerging opportunities are assessed in a measured way that balances potential impact with institutional risk and resource demands.

2. Portfolio-level distribution

The tiering exercise produced a balanced distribution of projects across Tiers 1 and 2. In total, **86% of projects were classified in Tiers 1-2, 10% in Tier 3, and 4% in Tier 4**. Several clear patterns emerged:

- A **coherent set of Tier 1 core commitments present across all Pillars**, reflecting the essential scientific functions that define IARC's global role.
- A **substantial group of Tier 2 projects**, representing high-value areas of strategic growth with strong potential for impact.
- A number of Tier 3 projects that remain **scientifically relevant but are dependent on external funding** and thus conditional in their implementation.

An exhaustive list of all projects planned for 2026-2030, along with their scores and tier classifications, is available in Annex 2 of the MTS 2026-2030.

IV. Future use of the Strategic Prioritization Framework

The Strategic Prioritization Framework is not a one-time exercise; it is a **management tool for the entirety of the MTS period**. It will guide planning, project design, resource allocation, and communication with governance and partners.

The tiered framework is **closely linked to IARC's financial planning**, particularly the allocation of Regular Budget (RB) resources. While projects already signed and funded for 2026–2030 will proceed as planned, all new proposals will need to comply with the tier-based rules integrated into IARC's existing project development and funding guidelines. This ensures that research teams do not invest time in developing projects that cannot be supported under existing cost structures and allows the Agency to maintain a **coherent and sustainable project portfolio**.

These updated operational guidelines are expected to come into effect in **January 2026**.

Conclusion

The Strategic Prioritization Framework set out in this document marks an important turning point for IARC. It reflects both the ambition of the MTS 2026–2030 and the financial constraints that shape what IARC can realistically deliver. By necessity, difficult choices have been made. While the Framework helps protect the conditions that allow IARC to maintain its core global public goods, many important scientific initiatives, including several IARC Flagships, will advance more slowly, or may not proceed at all, unless additional resources become available. This means that, despite our best efforts, **IARC will not be able to fully implement the mandate entrusted to it by its Participating States**.

The implications reach far beyond the institution itself. Slower progress in cancer prevention and research capacity-building affects countries' ability to design effective policies, to detect risks early, and to build resilient research ecosystems. Once weakened, some of these functions cannot be rapidly rebuilt. The consequences would be felt in national cancer plans, health system planning, and ultimately in the lives of populations who depend on the evidence that IARC generates.

For these reasons, IARC will publish a **peer-reviewed article**, launched in connection with the 2026 Governing Council and the Agency's 60th Anniversary Conference, to present the **global health implications of chronic underfunding** and to illustrate what the world stands to lose. Taken together, this publication and the prioritization scenario form a **call to action:** a clear invitation to Participating States and partners to strengthen their support so that IARC can deliver the full ambition of the MTS and continue to provide the scientific foundation essential to cancer prevention worldwide.