The International Civil Aviation Organization

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations, established in 1944 to manage the administration and governance of the Convention on International Civil Aviation (the Chicago Convention).

Introduction

ICAO was established by the Chicago Convention to develop the principles and techniques of international air navigation, and foster the planning and development of international air transport, to ensure its safe and orderly growth. Headquartered in Montreal, Canada, it has regional offices in Bangkok, Cairo, Dakar, Lima, Mexico City, Nairobi and Paris. ICAO members are sovereign states, including all EU Member States. It also cooperates extensively with various international organisations.

Chicago Convention

The Chicago Convention was adopted and signed in 1944 and has been in effect since 1947. Originally signed by 52 states, it now has 191 signatory states. The Convention sets the foundation for rules on air navigation as a whole. It is intended to improve safety in flying and set the basis for application of the common air navigation system across the world. It lays down general principles as well as rights and obligations of signatory states in relation to air transport. It also sets out the objectives, structure and status of ICAO, giving it standard-setting responsibilities and general overall supervisory functions.

Structure and functioning

ICAO is made up of an Assembly, a Council with various subordinate bodies, and a Secretariat.

The Assembly, which is composed of representatives from all member states, gives the political direction of the organisation. It meets every three years and may meet extraordinarily at any time upon the call of the Council or at the request of at least one fifth of member states. Its last session took place from 27 September to 7 October 2016. The Assembly reviews the work of the organisation, sets the policy for the coming years, votes a triennial budget and elects the member states to be represented on the Council. In the Assembly, all member states have one vote. Most decisions of the Assembly take the form of a resolution.

The Council is the governing body of ICAO. It is composed of 36 member states elected every three years by the Assembly. It is led by the President of the Council (currently Olumuyiwa Benard Aliu). Council member states are elected by the Assembly for three years. The Council adopts Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs). It carries out the directions of the Assembly, administers the finances, appoints the Secretary General, collects and disseminates information on air navigation and international air services, reports on infractions of the Convention and submits annual reports to the Assembly. The Council is assisted by the Air Navigation Commission (technical matters), the Air Transport Committee (economic matters), the Committee on Joint Support of Air Navigation Services, and the Finance Committee.

The Secretariat, headed by the Secretary General (currently Fang Liu) – the chief executive officer of ICAO – has five divisions: the Air Navigation Bureau, the Air Transport Bureau, the Technical Co-operation Bureau, the Legal Affairs and External Relations Bureau and the Bureau of Administration and Services. The Secretariat updates, under the direction of the Council, the annexes to the Chicago Convention.

Objectives and tasks

Article 44 of the Chicago Convention states that ICAO’s objective is to ensure the safe and orderly growth of international civil aviation, 'encourage the development of airways, airports, and air navigation facilities for international civil aviation', 'prevent economic waste caused by unreasonable competition', give every
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member state 'a fair opportunity to operate international airlines' and avoid discrimination between member states.

The main task of the organisation is to adopt SARPs and policies in support of a safe, efficient, secure, economically sustainable and environmentally responsible civil aviation. SARPs are published by ICAO in the form of annexes to the Chicago Convention. Many of them are constantly evolving in step with the latest developments and innovations. They do not have the same legally binding force as the articles of the Convention because the annexes are not international treaties subject to ratification. However, ICAO carries out audits to monitor member states' compliance with SARPs. Neither the operation of ICAO nor the adoption of SARPs contravenes the sovereignty of the signatory states. The latter can adopt more restrictive rules.

In addition to its core work, ICAO coordinates assistance and capacity-building for its member states in support of numerous aviation development objectives; produces global plans to coordinate multilateral strategic progress for safety and air navigation; monitors and reports on air transport sector performance metrics; and audits member states' civil aviation oversight capabilities in the areas of safety and security.

Relations with international organisations and other bodies

Although ICAO members can only be sovereign states, it cooperates with many organisations and bodies such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), Airports Council International (ACI), the Civil Air Navigation Services Organisation (CANSO), the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the International Business Aviation Council (IBAC).

Relations with the European Union

The EU is an ad hoc observer in several ICAO bodies, such as the Assembly and other technical bodies. At the ICAO Council, the EU has no status but can be represented when invited on an ad hoc basis. To handle relations with ICAO, in 2007 the European Commission established an Office in Montreal, part of the delegation of the European Union to Canada. The Office attends relevant ICAO meetings, helps to coordinate EU representation on the ICAO Council, informs EU representatives and members of the ICAO Council on EU air transport policy, cooperates with the ICAO Secretariat on technical matters, acts as a liaison office to ICAO for the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and promotes EU participation in ICAO activities.

A delegation of Members from Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety visited ICAO on 8-10 February 2016 and on 11-13 May to follow ICAO negotiations on aviation emissions. Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism visited ICAO in May 2016. Both delegations also participated in the 39th ICAO Assembly from 3 to 7 October 2016.

Recent developments

At the latest (39th) ICAO Assembly, which took place from 27 September to 7 October 2016 in Montreal, the two main topics under discussion were security and environment.

On 7 October, ICAO reached an agreement on a first-ever global market-based measure to offset CO₂ emissions from international civil aviation above 2020 levels. The agreement is voluntary until 2026 and becomes mandatory as of 2027. Pending a decision in ICAO on such a global measure, the EU had suspended the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) requirements for flights to and from non-European countries until the end of 2016. Now, it will have to decide whether the ETS needs adjustment.

The 39th ICAO Assembly also formally recognised the development of a first-ever global CO₂ emissions certification standard and of a new partucile-matter standard for aircraft, elected its new Council, endorsed the development of ICAO’s global aviation security plan and adopted its first-ever cyber-security resolution.

ICAO has also been working on the international regulatory framework for remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS, or drones). It is drafting amendments to the annexes to the Chicago Convention, publishing guidance material and providing information about drone regulation as well as tips on safe drone operation. It has specified that since drones are aircraft, the major parts of the regulatory framework applicable to manned aircraft are directly applicable to them too. The 39th ICAO Assembly agreed on the need to act on this topic at global level as well as on the importance of ensuring consistence between actions at various levels.

This is an update of an earlier edition of this ‘at a glance’ note, from May 2016.