



ISBN vs ISSN:
**Which identifier do you need
for your publication?**
A guidance document

July 31, 2026

About ICARDA

The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) is a treaty-based, autonomous, non-profit, international organization that was established in 1975, and is governed by a Board of Trustees. Under the auspices of the CGIAR System, and in accordance with the provisions of the Charter, ICARDA focuses on delivering innovative solutions for sustainable agricultural development in the non-tropical dry areas of the developing world. ICARDA provides innovative, science-based solutions to improve the livelihoods and resilience of resource-poor smallholder farmers. This is done through strategic partnerships, linking research to development and capacity building, and by considering gender equality and the role of youth in transforming agriculture in non-tropical dry areas.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

The Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team of ICARDA improves the decision-making and impact of research organizations through four areas of expertise: monitoring and evaluation to plan, implement and evaluate the impact of projects and programs throughout the project lifecycle; knowledge management to capitalize on learning, dissemination and knowledge sharing; data management to collect data and ensure its quality and accuracy; and research software development to improve digital applications in support of the work.

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Acronyms & Glossary

Comms: Communications team.

DDGR: Deputy Director General – Research.

EISSN: the ISSN for the online edition.

ISBN: International Standard Book Number: *13-digit identifier for monographic publications.*

ISSN: International Standard Serial Number: *8-digit identifier for serial titles.*

MEL: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: *ICARDA's online platform that helps teams to plan, track, and report their work, including storing and monitoring knowledge products and other functions. Additionally, MEL is a team with diverse areas of expertise, among which supporting knowledge management to enhance learning, dissemination, and knowledge sharing.*

MELSpace: *ICARDA's public repository for disseminating approved knowledge products.*

Monographic publication: *A comprehensive work focused on a single subject, specific theme, or a narrowly defined aspect of a field.*

Peer-reviewed: *A designation for scholarly work that has been evaluated by independent experts in the same field before publication to ensure the quality, validity, and rigor of the research.*

Executive summary

ICARDA publications are meant to be easily discoverable, accessible, and citable. Having the correct identifiers is essential, as they enhance discoverability and credibility, meet compliance standards, and simplify tracking within the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) platform and MELSpace, ICARDA's public repository for approved knowledge products.

For monographic publications like books and reports, researchers should request an International Standard Book Number (ISBN). In contrast, recurring series such as policy briefs, working papers, manuals, and newsletters require an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN). Annual reports are unique and need both an ISSN for the series and an ISBN for that specific year's volume.

Before requesting any identifiers, researchers must ensure that their drafts are uploaded to MEL with the necessary core metadata. This guide clarifies which publications require ISBNs or ISSNs and provides step-by-step instructions for requesting these identifiers. The Communications and MEL teams are responsible for coordinating approvals and generating ISBNs and ISSNs.

This guide serves as a resource for ICARDA staff, outlining which publications need specific identifiers and detailing the workflows for requests and approvals.

The decision tree in **Annex A** will serve as a checklist and support navigating the workflow from the identifier request through to publication.

Introduction

It is important for a research organization to document all its knowledge products, regardless of their type. This includes both peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters, as well as non-peer-reviewed products such as briefs, newsletters, and reports. These publications are crucial for disseminating information and establishing the organization's reputation and expertise in its field. For example, briefs and reports can effectively communicate research findings and policy recommendations to stakeholders and decision-makers. Newsletters can keep members informed about new developments in a specific area and highlight the organization's research and achievements. Ultimately, the key is to document and communicate the organization's knowledge products effectively, efficiently, and tailored to the audience's needs. This approach can enhance the organization's reputation and advance knowledge in its field.

To support this effort, obtaining an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) and/or an ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) for the organization's publications is essential. This guide explains the importance of having an ISSN and/or an ISBN when publishing research outputs and outlines the process for obtaining them.

What are ISBN and ISSN?

ISBN: International Standard Book Number

An [ISBN](#)², which stands for **International Standard Book Number**, is a 13-digit identification number assigned to **monographic publications** (i.e., one-off publications about one single topic rather than journals, newspapers, or other types of serials). Examples are articles, books, and mixed-media publications. An ISBN allows for more efficient marketing and identification of products by booksellers, libraries, universities, wholesalers, and distributors. Initially, ISBNs were 10 digits long, but in January 2007, the system transitioned to a 13-digit format. **Figure 1** shows the 13-³ISBN-13). **Figure 2** illustrates the former 10-digit long ISBN (ISBN-10) for historical reference only as new publications use ISBN-13.

² ISBN Standard | International ISBN Agency. (n.d.). <https://www.isbn-international.org/content/what-isbn/10>

³ What is an ISBN? | International ISBN Agency. (n.d.). <https://www.isbn-international.org/content/what-isbn/10>

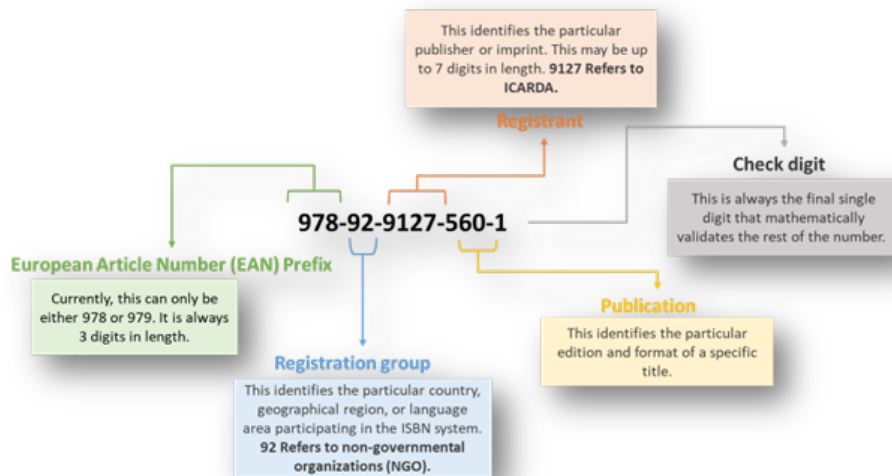


Figure 1. ISBN-13 components and example.

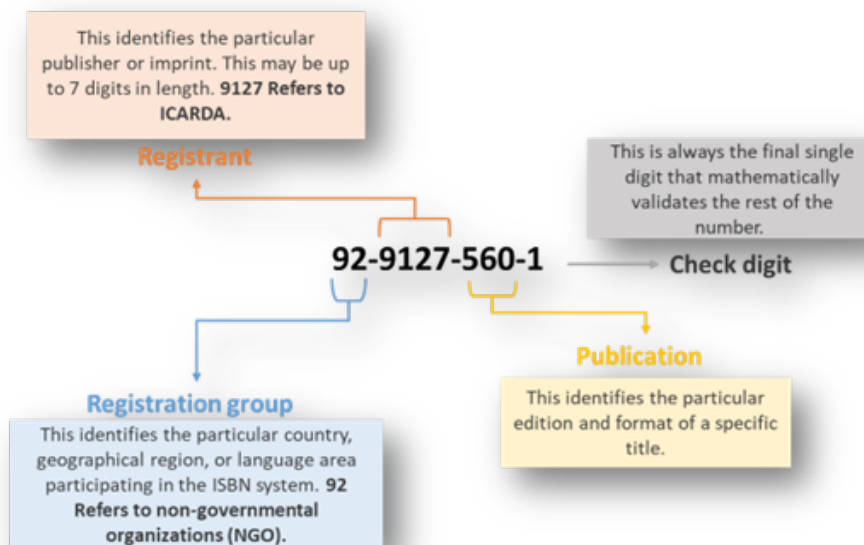


Figure 2. Legacy ISBN-10⁴ components and example.

ISSN: International Standard Serial Number

An [ISSN](#)⁵, or **International Standard Serial Number**, is an 8-digit code used to identify **types of serial publications**, including newspapers, journals, magazines, briefs, and other periodicals. The ISSN can be assigned to both print (ISSN) and electronic (eISSN) versions of these publications, and it identifies the series title, not the publisher. **Figure 3** shows how the ISSN is composed.

⁴ ISBN-10 is no longer assigned and has been included to help interpret older publications.

⁵ What is an ISSN? | ISSN. (n.d.). <https://www.issn.org/understanding-the-issn/what-is-an-issn/>

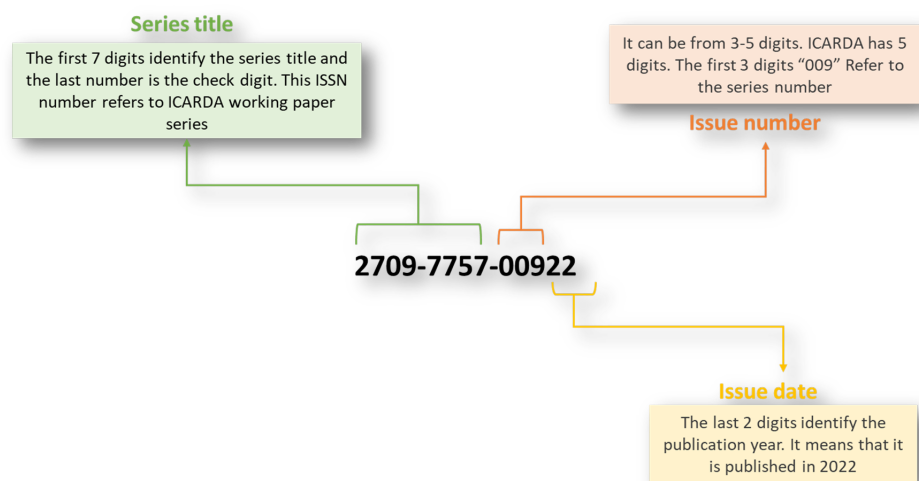


Figure 3. ISSN components and example.

Key differences between ISBN and ISSN at a glance

Table 1 summarizes the main differences between ISBN and ISSN.

Dimension	ISBN	ISSN
Identifies	A specific monographic work/edition (e.g., Unpacking Scaling in Agricultural Research for Development: Performance Insights from the Kashkadarya Research Station for Agricultural Innovation)	The title of a serial (e.g., ICARDA Policy Briefs series)
Persistence	Changes with each edition/format	Stays the same from issue to issue until the series title changes
Scope	E.g., books, monographs, standalone reports, single yearbooks	E.g., journals, magazines, newsletters, policy brief series, working papers, manuals series
Publisher element	Includes registrant element	No publisher identifier; it follows the title even if the publisher changes
Should <u>not</u> be used for	Serial issues appearing multiple times per year	One-off monographic works

Table 1. Key difference between ISBN and ISSN.

Note: ISBN and ISSN serve different purposes but, in some specific instances, they can also complement each other and be used together in the same publication. For example, in an Annual Report, the ISBN identifies a specific volume (e.g., the 2017 edition), while the ISSN designates the publication title and remains consistent from year to year.

The importance of identifiers such as ISBN and ISSN

- **Improved discoverability:** ISBN and ISSN help researchers, librarians, and others find and access your research outputs more easily. These identifiers are widely utilized in research databases and catalogues, increasing the likelihood that potential readers will discover the publication.
- **Enhanced credibility:** having an ISBN or ISSN adds credibility to the research. It makes the work more traceable and identifiable, which can help establish the organization's reputation as a reliable and respected source of knowledge.
- **Efficient tracking and management:** unique identifiers for each publication simplify the tracking and management of knowledge dissemination. This leads to a more organized knowledge management system and helps prevent duplication of efforts.
- **Compliance with standards:** obtaining an ISBN or ISSN ensures that the publication complies with international standards for publication identification. This can help the research meet the requirements set by various organizations and funding agencies.

In summary, possessing an ISBN or ISSN is crucial for any research organization aiming to improve the visibility, credibility, and management of its knowledge products. ICARDA's historical usage of these identifiers highlights their significance in the research community.

ICARDA prerequisites for requesting identifiers

While it is true that not all knowledge products created by scientists require an ISBN and/or ISSN (e.g., presentations, posters, image do not require an identifier), having one can be beneficial for identifying and tracking publications, especially when those publications are intended to be cited or referenced by others.

To request an ISBN or ISSN, the publication must:

- Adhere to ICARDA's [Guidance on Production and Dissemination of Information Products](https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11766/7815) | <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11766/7815>
- Receive approval from the Head of Comms
- Be uploaded in MEL | <https://mel.cgiar.org/>. By uploading the knowledge product, a MEL link will be generated. This is an internal link with a URL starting with <https://mel.cgiar.org/>...

Tip: *uploading records in MEL with essential metadata (e.g., title, authors, abstract, keywords, language, license, funding) accelerates their approval.*

When and how to request an ISBN (monographic publications)

Publications typically needing an ISBN

- Books and monographs
- Standalone research or technical reports
- Single-issue yearbooks/annual reports (often with ISSN for the series and ISBN for the specific volume)

Depending on the need for language editing and layout, there are two processes for the ISBN (**process A** and **process B**). See them summarized in the sections below.

Process A — ISBN for knowledge product requiring language editing/layout (external supplier involved)

Roles involved: Scientist/Research Assistant (**S/RA**), Communications team (**Comms**), MEL team (**MEL**), Procurement Unit (**PSD**).

Step	Role(s)	Action
1	S/RA	Upload the first draft to MEL.
2	S/RA	Request to the MEL team an ISBN.
3	S/RA	Request PSD to identify vendors to support language editing and layout design with support from the Comms team as needed and include the internal MEL link (obtained after the upload in MEL).
4	PSD/Comms	Forward the first draft to the external supplier for editing and layout design.
5	MEL	Seek approval from the Comms team to create an ISBN and share the MEL link.
6	Comms	The Head of Comms will review the request.
<i>If the Head of Comms approves the request for the ISBN</i>		
7a	MEL	Create and allocate the ISBN, sharing it with the S/RA and the Comms team.
8a	Comms	Share the ISBN with the supplier for its inclusion on the front matter and the barcode on the back cover.
9a	Comms	Return the final files to S/RA.
10a	S/RA	Deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
11a	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace with the ISBN and the language/layout editing		
<i>If the Head of Comms does not approve the request for the ISBN</i>		
7b	Comms	Communicate the rejection and return the final files with the language editing and layout design to S/RA.
8b	S/RA	Deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
9b	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace without the ISBN but with the language/layout editing		

Process B — ISBN for knowledge product not requiring language editing/layout

Roles involved: Scientist/Research Assistant (**S/RA**), Communications team (**Comms**), MEL team (**MEL**).

Step	Role(s)	Action
1	S/RA	Upload the first draft to MEL.
2	S/RA	Request to the MEL team an ISBN.
3	MEL	Seek approval from the Comms team to create an ISBN and share the internal MEL link (obtained after upload in MEL).
4	Comms	The Head of Comms will review the request.
<i>If the Head of Comms approves the request for the ISBN</i>		
5a	MEL	Create and allocate the ISBN, sharing it with the S/RA and the Comms team.
6a	S/RA	Prepare “ready to publish” files by adding the ISBN (see the paragraph below for instructions on the ISBN placing) and deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
7a	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace with the ISBN		
<i>If the Head of Comms does not approve the request for the ISBN</i>		
5b	Comms	Communicate the rejection to the S/RA and the MEL team.
6b	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace without the ISBN		

Where ISBN identifiers are placed

For general awareness, there are two methods for adding ISBNs to research outputs created by scientists, depending on the type of knowledge product produced.

Process A: Knowledge product requiring language editing/layout (external supplier involved)

ISBN placement

- **Front matter:** “ISBN 978XXXXXXXXXX” is placed on the imprint/copyright page (usually the back of the title page).
- **Back cover:** the ISBN barcode is placed at the bottom right of the back cover.
- In **Figure 4** is an **example of ISBN placement on the front matter:**
 - Political Economy of the Wheat Sector in Morocco: Seed Systems, Varietal Adoption, and Impacts <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11766/8505>



Figure 4. ISBN placement on the front matter.

- In Figure 5 is an example of ISBN barcode placement on the back cover:

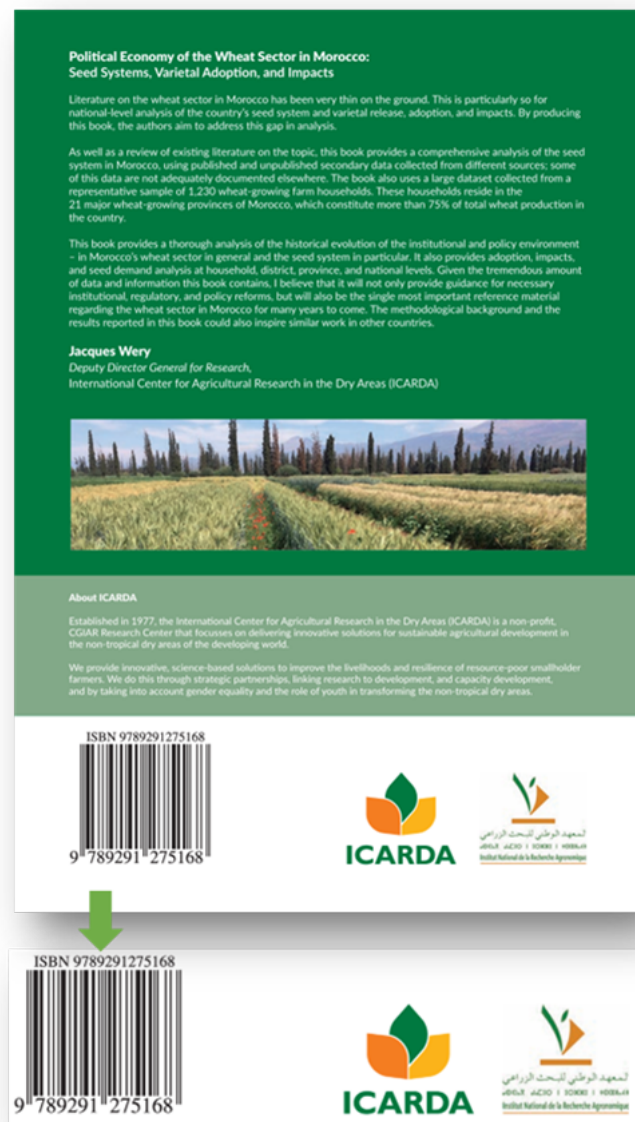


Figure 5. ISBN barcode placement on the back cover.

Process B: Knowledge product without language editing/layout

ISBN placement

- **Back cover:** the ISBN is placed at the bottom of the back cover.
- In Figure 6 is an example of ISBN placement on the back cover:

- الزراعة باستخدام الملقحات البديلة. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11766/68144>



Figure 6. ISBN placement on the back cover.

Adding the ICARDA license and ISBN caption to your knowledge product

For general awareness, below is an example of the ISBN caption.



Copyright and Fair Use: ISBN [Insert ISBN here]

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Note: where indicated in red, add the ISBN and the year of publication. If a photo is used, include the photo credit. For photos featuring human subjects, written consent is required. For more information on obtaining written consent for images of individuals, please visit the [Consents](#) folder on the ICARDA MEL SharePoint.

When and how to request an ISSN (serial publications)

Publications typically needing an ISSN

- Policy briefs
- Brochure series
- Technical manuals series
- Working papers
- Fact sheets
- Manuals
- And similar **recurring** outputs.

Depending on the need for language editing and layout, there are two processes for the ISSN (**process C** and **process D**). See them summarized in the sections below.

Process C — ISSN for knowledge product requiring language editing/layout (external supplier involved)

Roles involved: Scientist/Research Assistant (**S/RA**), Communications team (**Comms**), MEL team (**MEL**), Procurement Unit (**PSD**).

Step	Role(s)	Action
1	S/RA	Upload the first draft to MEL.
2	S/RA	Request to the Comms team an ISSN, PSD or Comms for language editing and layout design, and include the internal MEL link (obtained after upload in MEL).
3	PSD/Comms	Forward the first draft to the external supplier for editing and layout design.
<i>If the Head of Comms approves the request for the ISSN</i>		
4a	Comms	Share the ISSN with the supplier for its inclusion on the front matter.
5a	Comms	Return the final files to S/RA.
6a	S/RA	Deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
7a	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace with the ISSN and the language/layout editing		
<i>If the Head of Comms does not approve the request for the ISSN</i>		
4b	Comms	Communicate the rejection and return the final files with the language editing and layout design to S/RA.
5b	S/RA	Deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
6b	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace without the ISSN but with the language/layout editing		

Process D — ISSN for a knowledge product not requiring language editing/layout

Roles involved: Scientist/Research Assistant (**S/RA**), Communications team (**Comms**), MEL team (**MEL**).

Step	Role(s)	Action
1	S/RA	Upload the first draft to MEL.
2	S/RA	Seek approval from the Comms team to create an ISSN and share the internal MEL link (obtained after upload in MEL).
3	Comms	The Head of Comms will review the request.
<i>If the Head of Comms approves the request for the ISSN</i>		
4a	S/RA	Prepare “ready to publish” files by adding the ISSN shared by Comms (see the paragraph below for the instructions on the ISBN placing) and deposit the final version in MEL for final approval.
5a	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace with the ISSN		
<i>If the Head of Comms does not approve the request for the ISSN</i>		
4b	Comms	Communicate the rejection to the S/RA and the MEL team.
5b	MEL	Approve the knowledge product and generate a MELSpace link/handle.
Result: the knowledge product is published in MELSpace without the ISSN		

Where ISSN identifiers are placed

For general awareness, there is one method for adding ISSN to research outputs created by scientists.

ISSN placement

- **Front matter:** “ISSN XXXX-XXXX” is placed on the imprint/copyright page (usually the back of the title page).
- In **Figure 7** is an **example of ISSN barcode placement**:
 - Enhancing Food Security in Arab Countries Project: Adoption and Impacts of Project Interventions and Returns on Investment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11766/69417>

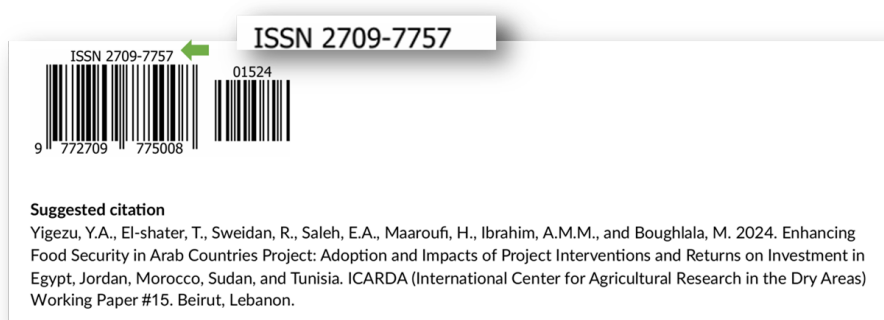


Figure 7. ISSN barcode placement.

Frequently asked questions

Q1. Can a publication have both ISBN and ISSN?

Yes, it can. For example, an annual report for 2020 may include both a series ISSN and a unique ISBN for that year's volume.

Q2. Do I need a new ISBN for a minor correction?

No, you do not need a new ISBN for small corrections. However, new editions or formats (such as print versus electronic publications) do require separate ISBNs.

Q3. When do I need an e-ISSN?

You should request an e-ISSN if the serial publication has a distinct online edition, in addition to the print ISSN.

Q4. Who generates barcodes?

The Comms team will generate the ISSN, while the MEL teams will generate the ISBN barcodes from the assigned number.

Annex A – Decision trees

Prerequisites

