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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

INLAND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Working Party on Combined Transport
(Thirty-eighth session, 7-9 October 2002,
agenda item 10)

PROGRAMME OF WORK FOR 2003 TO 2007

New work strategy for the Working Party

Note by the Chair

INTRODUCTION

1. On 21 February 2002, a meeting of the Bureau of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC) and the chairpersons of its subsidiary bodies was held. At this meeting, a discussion on strategic objectives of the ITC took place. In my contribution for the follow-up of this discussion, I wrote: "To maintain and improve our position, we need to be flexible and to be able to respond fast to changes. The actual structure of working parties might be too rigid to act flexibly. Problems that arise sometimes ask for faster reactions/solutions than we are able to provide now." How can our Working Party on Combined Transport contribute to an improved flexibility and efficient, useful and valuable meetings?

STRUCTURE OF THE WORKING PARTY ON COMBINED TRANSPORT

2. The Working Party meets twice a year (spring/autumn). This has been the case for many years. At the moment, three informal expert groups are established under the Working Party: one expert group that investigates the possibilities for reconciliation and harmonization of liability regimes governing combined transport operations. This expert group has been active since December 1998. At its session in September 2001, two expert groups were established in the field of the role of railways in combined transport. All three expert groups are informal groups and work without interpretation services and without translation of working documents. Meetings are held either in Geneva or in one of the participating member States. In between the meetings, communication is done by e-mail. The secretariat services all three expert groups. All three expert groups are limited in time and have a limited mandate.

3. In practice, the time between the meetings is too short for an expert group to make sufficient progress and prepare a high-quality discussion paper. This is partly due to the fact that all documentation should be sent to the translation services ten to twelve weeks before the meeting. If the documents cannot be distributed in all three working languages well before the meeting, the participants of the meeting do not have enough time to read the documents, discuss them at their ministry or organization. The result is that an in-depth discussion at the meeting cannot take place. This is frustrating for all parties involved.

4. The agenda items of the Working Party differ in nature. Some agenda items serve mainly to inform the participants of the state of affairs, other agenda items are discussion items.

SUGGESTED NEW APPROACH

5. Considering the aforementioned, I propose to consider a reduction of the number of sessions of the Working Party to one per year. In between the sessions, the delegates can be informed in written form about the agenda items that are of an informative nature (such as the status of the AGTC Agreement and its protocol and the inventory of existing AGTC standards and parameters). Of course, there will be time and room for discussion or questions about those subjects during the annual meeting.

6. The agenda items that need a more in-depth discussion can be prepared by small ad hoc expert groups that are limited in time and mandate. These expert groups could consist of two to

five persons. They will report at the annual session of the Working Party about their progress. This gives the expert groups more time and more possibilities to come up with an in-depth progress report annex discussion paper, that can be distributed to the members of the Working Party in all three working languages well before the meeting. This way, the participants of the meeting can better prepare the meeting, so that a real discussion can take place at the meeting.

7. At every annual meeting, the Working Party will consider the need of continuation of the expert groups and the need for the establishment of new expert groups. This gives the Working Party the possibility to react faster than nowadays to actual changes.

8. A standing agenda item is "New developments in the field of combined transport in UNECE member countries". It is very important to be informed about the developments in the field of combined transport in the different countries. The Working Party serves as a place where information on this item can be exchanged. The way this takes place could, however, be improved if delegates would provide the relevant information to the secretariat. That way the contributions can be translated and disseminated before the meeting, so everybody has the time to read it and possibly come up with some questions. This would probably lead to more "two-way communication" than is the case at present. Apart from that, a written contribution can also serve as 'reference book' after the meeting.

9. The terms of Reference of the UNECE does not prescribe a maximum period of time that one person can occupy the seat of Chairperson of a Working Party. A person is elected for one year, but can be re-elected time after time. It should, however, be avoided that one person chairs the Working Party too long as this can lead to a rigidity. I therefore propose that the Working Party agrees informally that its Chairperson changes at a regular interval, for example, every three years.

10. I hope that the Working Party will consider the above proposals as a first contribution to a discussion that will lead to more flexibility of Working Party and to more efficient, useful and valuable meetings.
