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Meeting servicing arrangements
Recent developments and implications for the work of UNECE

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Note by the secretariat

Meeting servicing arrangements

1. On 27 August 2020, the Director General of UNOG and UNOG Conference Services briefed delegations on the arrangements at the Palais de Nations and the meeting planning for the remainder of 2020.
2. The Director General informed that UNOG's capacity to service meetings of Geneva-based entities remains severely limited, due to a combination of COVID-19 response measures and financial constraints triggered by the liquidity crisis.
3. As a consequence, the quota for meeting services allocated to UNECE has been reduced from three to only one meeting a day with interpretation. Due to technical constraints, hybrid sessions are usually limited to two-hour timeslots, compared to the traditional three-hour formats of onsite meetings. Practically, this means that UNECE has to reduce its interpreted sessions from 18 hours to 4-6 hours per day.
4. With this significant reduction in interpreted meetings, UNOG is not able to support the UNECE Official Calendar of Meetings for the Fourth Quarter of 2020, as originally scheduled.
5. In a follow up exchange with UNECE, the Director General has confirmed the below arrangements, as of 3 September 2020:

a) Available room capacity vs. UNECE 2020 calendar of official meetings:

While restrictions have been gradually eased in the past weeks and months, UNOG can currently accommodate up to 1,000 meeting participants at the Palais for in-person meetings. The maximum occupancy in any given room cannot exceed 300; however, with social distancing guidelines in place, room capacity is vastly reduced. UNOG currently has at its disposal only four rooms that can accommodate up to six languages of interpretation and eleven rooms that can accommodate three languages of interpretation. This number will increase when the temporary conference building (Tempus) becomes operational later this month, adding three more rooms that can accommodate up to three languages of interpretation.

UNOG foresees no capacity issues to facilitate the calendar meetings of UNECE within the limits of existing UNOG servicing capacity. However, meeting organizers may need to manage the number of participants according to the room capacity. As an example, for the Human Rights Council resumed 43rd and subsequent 44th sessions, it was requested that only one delegate per mission attend in-person.

b) Available servicing capacity for different meeting formats:

UNOG has only four functioning rooms equipped with the necessary hardware and software to operate the online platforms. In addition, the existing technical staff can facilitate a maximum of

two virtual/hybrid meetings per day in parallel, both in the morning and in the afternoon, for a total of four virtual/hybrid slots per day. UNOG's available conference servicing capacity is being allocated based on each entity's 2019 share of meetings with interpretation of all mandated bodies. 25 percent of the existing capacity has been made available to UNECE. This translates into two meetings with interpretation per day (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). Virtual/hybrid meetings with remote statements exceeding a total of 30 minutes are limited to a maximum of 2-hours, a reduction from the standard 3-hour meeting time for in-person events.

- **Fully serviced meetings in E, F, R (physical):** This is possible within the capacity available to UNECE, with potentially reduced participant numbers, depending on social distancing measures. The Meetings Management Section (MMS) will be actively engaging with the UNECE focal point for meetings to establish the most suitable room for each request;
- **English only informal consultations (physical, remote):** This is possible in an in-person format, depending on the room availability and the number or informal meetings requested by UNECE. The secretariat is invited to request WebEx for remote meetings without interpretation;
- **Capacity for hybrid meetings in E, R, F envisioned as of September 2020 and for the remainder of 2020:**

It is extremely limited at present with a maximum of two hybrid/virtual events in parallel per day. Only the most critical meetings should be requested in hybrid format. Please note that using the platforms requires additional staff for technical coordination and support, as compared with in-person meetings, and no resources were foreseen and funded for this purpose in the 2020 programme budget.

c) Resource implications

The additional cost for virtual/hybrid meetings depends on the number of participants, duration, number of channels (languages) of interpretation, as well as the required technical support and moderation. There could potentially be cost implications for official regular calendar meetings should the liquidity situation worsen; we shall keep you abreast of the developments. All extrabudgetary events have to be fully funded by the organizers. (Please refer also to the Note Verbale by UNOG of 31 August 2020, annexed to this note.)

6. In light of the above, and after intensive internal consultations across UNECE and with the Bureaux of our subsidiary bodies on possible mitigating measures, the secretariat - in discussions with UNOG - developed a revised calendar that makes maximum use of the available support services and seeks to host meetings to the extent possible.

7. It prioritizes meetings of intergovernmental bodies over expert groups, where needed, taking into account also the importance of facilitating deliberations on issues with particular relevance to the pandemic response and the health and well-being of people in the ECE region.

8. Generally, the secretariat seeks to accommodate meetings within the different modalities stipulated by the respective Rules of Procedure, considering a combination of formal (interpreted) and informal (English only) sessions, to advance the work. Meetings may have to be shortened

and agendas to be reconsidered to focus on business-critical items, in order to accommodate the breadth of mandates under UNECE subprogrammes.

10. Moreover, the Bureau of EXCOM wishes to propose that the further extension of the special procedures for the COVID-19 period to retain the additional flexibility that these arrangements have afforded us in recent months. Several subsidiary bodies have put forward requests for related special procedures to ensure business continuity for their respective areas of work. (ECE/EX/2020/L.9, ECE/EX/2020/L.10 and ECE/EX/2020/L.11).

11. Regrettably, UNOG indicated informally that they will not be in a position to provide in full the resources needed to service even the reduced UNECE meeting quota, as additional technical costs for hybrid meetings have not been budgeted for and reduced allotments of Regular Budget resources do not cover all staffing needs of conference services for the remainder of 2020. The secretariat in its letter of 27 August 2020 sought the support of the member States to meet the funding gap to support the work of UNECE.

Financial aspects

12. The ongoing liquidity constraints faced by the Regular Budget has resulted in a number of restrictions, including a recruitment freeze and incremental allotments for post and non-post resources to ensure sufficient liquidity remains available to honour legal commitments to personnel and vendors across the UN Secretariat.

13. On 12 August, the UN Controller established a global payment plan for the organization, as a result of which a spending ceiling has been set for UNECE's post and non-post resources. This ceiling has resulted in an allocation of only 50% of the non-post resources for UNECE as approved by the General Assembly.

14. The UN Controller has advised that non-discretionary non-post expenses should be prioritized and paid during 2020. These non-post expenses primarily relate to IT operating costs. As a result, planned resources for consultants and travel of staff for the implementation of the Programme of Work are currently unavailable.

15. Additional funding for unplanned costs as they relate to interpretation and conference services provided by UNOG to UNECE are also unavailable.

16. The Controller has indicated that the situation may improve late in the year but will remain dependent upon Member State collections, the timing of which has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

17. This spending ceiling only relates to Section 20 (Economic Development in Europe) of the Regular Budget. Section 23 (Regional Programme for Technical Cooperation) and extrabudgetary funding remain unaffected and should move forward accordingly.

18. Should Member States be in a position to provide supplementary funding for UNOG provided conference services to the UNECE Regular Budget planned Calendar of Official Meetings in Q4, we would be most grateful.

Implications of COVID-19 and reduced meeting servicing capabilities on UNECE programme delivery in 2020

19. During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the planned deliverables and activities of UNECE. As the situation remains fluid, the impact of COVID-19 and reduced meeting servicing capabilities on the work of UNECE is still unfolding. While a more precise effect of this crisis will emerge by the end of the year, it has already affected the UNECE convening capacity and norm-setting work. The impact has so far included: (i) significantly reduced number of UNECE intergovernmental meetings with interpretation (from three to one meeting a day) serviced by UNOG as a result of a combination of COVID-19 response measures and financial constraints triggered by the liquidity crisis; (ii) meetings and capacity-building initiatives postponed beyond 2020 or cancelled; and (iii) a change in the mode of delivery of meetings and capacity building workshops from in-person to virtual or hybrid format with no or reduced interpretation.

20. The COVID-19 emergency has forced the UNECE to temporarily adjust, where possible, its methods of work and approach to developing its normative, policy guidance and other products. In particular, UNECE proceeded to organize inter-governmental meetings either as English only informal consultations or hybrid/virtual meetings with reduced servicing capacity, including interpretation facilities. In most cases, this resulted in reduced participation of delegations from member States where English is not official, thus impacting both the normative work and the sharing of national experiences and lessons learned.

21. The specific examples below describe some of the impact of the pandemic on delivery in 2020 in ECE subprogrammes:

a) Under subprogramme 1, the approach and format of a large number of meetings had to be changed. For instance, under the Water Convention, the Working Group on Integrated Water Resources management (IWRM) had to be delayed and reduced in duration. A back-to-back Bureau meeting had to be postponed to 29-30 September. The Implementation Committee was postponed from May (only informal meeting held then) to 31 August-2 September (hybrid). The Expert group on sanitation under the Protocol was postponed from April to an unknown date. For the same reason, the guidance on sanitation also had to be postponed and will be issued next year. The global workshop on climate change, disasters and health (under Convention and Protocol) was postponed from May to March 2021. Several planned regional/ national workshops to promote the Convention's opening also had to be postponed. ECE is now envisaging some of them as online events/ webinars.

b) Under subprogramme 2, a combined 20 official 3-hour sessions for two worldwide bodies serviced by UNECE, namely the two sub-committees under the ECOSOC Committee on Transport of Dangerous Goods (TDG) and Globally Harmonized System (GHS) were cancelled in June-July 2020. Their decisions have profound impacts globally on safety and the environment for all modes of transport, as well on workplace and consumers' safety. The delay in completing their programme of work will trigger subsequent delays both in implementation of provisions and updating of the corresponding legal instruments;

c) Under subprogramme 3, virtually all in-person meetings that were planned by the Statistics subprogramme between mid-March until the end of the year were cancelled and/or

postponed to 2021. Instead, informal online or hybrid meetings and new webinars were organized, targeting the same groups of experts, but with significant differences: substantially reduced length (approximately 50% of the time originally planned), limited opportunity for discussion (when interpretation was available), and focus on the impact of COVID-19 and response by National Statistical Offices. As a result, the possibility to share country experiences and learn from peers was reduced significantly. The impact of this is particularly serious in statistical areas where 2020 is a key year, like population and housing censuses: the large majority of ECE member States (including all EU member countries) are planning to conduct their census in 2021, and the meeting that was planned in September 2020 was the last opportunity for them to share experiences with other countries before the census is carried out;

d) Under subprogramme 4, the UNECE flagship annual PPP Forum had to be postponed. The Forum typically brings together over 400 PPP experts from around the world, and this year's edition was being hosted by the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a region that lacks the most basic infrastructure and efficient public services. However, ECE and over 100 PPP experts worked together to develop a key mandated output - the UNECE People-first PPP Evaluation Methodology, a tool for scoring and measuring PPP and infrastructure projects against the People-first PPP outcomes and the SDGs;

e) Under subprogramme 5, two major events, the Global Methane Forum and the International Forum on Energy for Sustainable Development, were postponed indefinitely though they had been prepared fully; meetings of three Groups of Experts (18 half days) were postponed and delivered later through on-line webinars without interpretation, with their formal segments partially merged into the meetings of two other Groups of Experts;

f) Under subprogramme 6, several capacity-building activities had to be cancelled or postponed due to the travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak. For example: (i) A pilot sub-regional capacity-building event for policy makers from transition economies on innovation policies for sustainable development, the first event of this kind in the UNECE region organized in co-operation with the UN Inter-Agency Task Team on Innovation for Sustainable Development, was cancelled. This triggered a concerted effort to convert the programme into a virtual format. UNECE and the Task Team are developing training modules adapted for use in a series of short webinars that can be scheduled over several weeks engaging the same participants. First pilots are planned for the fourth quarter of 2020; (ii) It was not possible to support the member States in their implementation of the agricultural quality standards and the UN/CEFACT eBusiness standards in Central Asia as envisaged in the current technical cooperation projects. Despite the challenges, the Trade subprogramme continued to engage virtually with member States both through their capitals and permanent missions in Geneva;

g) Under subprogramme 7, a Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) and the ECCA30/Bonn Challenge in Eastern and South-East Europe was postponed to 2021. Meanwhile, the UNECE organized two webinars with support of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to brief countries on the Bonn challenge pledging and organizational issues, as well as to provide an overview of financing opportunities to support countries in the implementation of FLR pledges. Seventeen informal briefing notes were developed and countries were invited to bilateral informal consultations (13 were held in July 2020 and 4 are planned by end of 2020) on the Bonn Challenge and ECCA30. Furthermore, the regular session of the Joint UNECE/FAO Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management

was also postponed to 2021. In order to still deliver on the agreed roadmap on the revision of the subprogramme's integrated programme of work (IPoW), the secretariat had to switch to informal consultations on key elements for a new IPoW to be considered for adoption in 2021;

h) Under subprogramme 8, the formal two-day annual session of the Standing Working Group on Ageing was switched to two shortened hybrid meetings complemented with informal on-line sessions without interpretation. In addition, the 2020 Policy seminar originally planned with interpretation had to be turned into a series of webinars in English only. Its main topic refocused on Older persons in emergency situations and lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Annex

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The United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) presents its compliments to the permanent missions and the permanent observer offices to the United Nations Office and other international organisations in Geneva and has the honour to refer to its previous *Notes Verbales* of 22 May, 12 June and 30 June 2020 on the return to the workplace and the resumption of conferencing activities at the Palais des Nations.

UNOG takes this opportunity to thank the permanent missions and permanent observer offices that were able to attend the briefing of 27 August 2020 on the challenges and opportunities faced by UNOG to service meetings and conferences. UNOG has taken due note of the questions, comments, and observations made during the briefing and has the honour of providing the following supplementary information.

UNOG remains fully committed to implementing its mandate to facilitate multilateral dialogue through the enabling of multilingual conferences and to providing high quality conference services to Member States, despite the complex situation created by the budget limitations placed on the United Nations, the liquidity constraints on regular budget activities, and the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 public health crisis, all of which have a compounding effect. As a result, UNOG's capacity to provide more meetings with interpretation beyond what can be accommodated with core staffing is extremely limited. Current available capacity allows for only four simultaneous meetings with interpretation per day. The regular budget liquidity crisis is also putting mandated webcasting of Human Rights Council meetings at risk.

Notwithstanding its financial challenges, UNOG has put in place necessary measures to ensure that the Palais des Nations is a safe working environment. In this regard, UNOG follows the Swiss Federal and Geneva Cantonal measures to ensure the safety and security of staff and delegates and to minimize risks linked to the propagation of COVID-19. UNOG has adapted the measures, as appropriate, based on the advice of the local network of UN Medical Directors. For meetings at the Palais des Nations, the following measures have been put into place:

- Meeting rooms at the Palais des Nations are available, but with reduced capacity, resulting from the physical distancing requirements of at least 1.5 metres distance between people.
- Contact details of all participants are registered in Indico.UN to ensure contact tracing. To facilitate this, all meeting participants are kindly reminded to register in Indico.UN when attending a meeting at the Palais des Nations.
- All persons inside and in proximity of meeting rooms are required to wear face coverings.

Permanent missions and permanent observer offices
to the United Nations Office
and other international organizations in Geneva

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In-person meetings are possible in all conference rooms. As a response to requests from permanent missions, UNOG has undertaken the necessary preparatory work for meetings with interpretation to be conducted with simultaneous in-person and virtual participation (hybrid meetings). UNOG is also retraining and redeploying staff to provide technical moderation and support for such meetings. As a result, during June and July 2020, UNOG was able to host 327 meetings: 82 hybrid meetings with interpretation, 52 hybrid meetings without interpretation, and 193 virtual meetings. This is, however, far less than the number of meetings UNOG normally hosts during the same period.

Hybrid and virtual meetings with interpretation require a specialized platform provided by an outside vendor. UNOG is currently working with three different vendors to address the specific needs and requirements of each meeting. While the three vendors have different pricing structures, they all essentially apply metered pricing based on the number of participants, languages and minutes of connection. To properly run virtual/hybrid meetings, up to four technical staff are required to manage and operate the platform for a meeting. These staff perform moderation on the platform during the meeting, pre-meeting set-up and testing, and technical support before and during the sessions. In the case of hybrid conferences, this staffing requirement is in addition to the existing need for a sound operator in the conference room during all in-person meetings. Under the regular budget, the additional costs to host a 2-hour hybrid/virtual meeting in 6 six languages for 200 participants is typically \$2,500, depending on the platform available. For extra-budgetary meetings, the additional cost is typically \$3,200. While UNOG has been able to establish, within its very limited resources, the infrastructure and operational framework to hold hybrid and virtual meetings, it requires adequate resources to run such meetings.

With very limited funding to ensure surge capacity to meet the demands for meetings, UNOG is carefully monitoring its expenditures and will adapt as the financial situation evolves. However, until the financial and public health situation improves, UNOG will prioritize mandated regular budget conferences, and will allocate its available meeting capacity based on average prior year usage. This approach to support entities organizing meetings is deemed the most appropriate solution.

While the liquidity crisis is already severely limiting UNOG's ability to increase its capacity to service meetings during peak times, the request for new services to enable virtual/hybrid meetings, renders the financial situation even more complex. Thus, UNOG appeals to concerned permanent missions to raise the issue of the impact of the non-payment of arrears and assessed contributions with their capitals. UNOG also appeals to permanent missions and observer offices to provide grants or voluntary contributions to support hybrid/virtual meetings. At the same time, UNOG will be asking meeting secretariats to cover the incremental costs of running virtual/hybrid meeting platforms or to make available human resources to assist with the technical moderation and coordination aspects of running virtual/hybrid meetings.

The permanent missions and permanent observer offices are reminded that conference rooms at UNOG can be reserved via the Meetings Management Section (MMS), Division of Conference Management. The MMS team can be reached by sending an email to mms@un.org or by phoning 022/917 3668.

The United Nations Office at Geneva thanks the permanent missions and permanent observer offices to the United Nations and other international organisations in Geneva for their attention and takes this opportunity to convey to them renewed assurances of its highest consideration and will keep them informed of further developments.

31 August 2020

