

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
112th Meeting
Geneva, 14 December 2020

EXCOM/CONCLU/112

CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS

Meeting of the Executive Committee
14 December 2020

FORMAL SEGMENT

Item 1 – Adoption of the agenda.

1. The provisional draft agenda for the 112th meeting was adopted.

Item 2 – Chair’s conclusions from the last meeting.

2. The conclusions from the 111th meeting of EXCOM (EXCOM/CONCLU/111) were adopted.

Item 3 - Update on Special Procedures during COVID-19 period - Extension of Special Procedures during COVID-19 period.

3. The Chair recalled that EXCOM had adopted special procedures in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure business continuity, including, inter alia, the submission of decisions taken at informal meetings to a silence procedure for adoption. Pointing out that the UN Office in Geneva had not yet resumed its pre-pandemic capacity for meeting servicing, and the potential for a resumption of COVID-mitigation measures, the Chair requested EXCOM to consider extending the above-mentioned special procedures for EXCOM and certain subsidiary bodies until the end of 31 March 2021, on the understanding that they would not be used if formal meetings could resume in the required capacity prior to that date. He also asked EXCOM to approve special procedures for the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships (CICPPP).

4. The representative of the European Union and its member States found the experience with special procedures positive and appreciated the transparency they provided. She welcomed the introduction by the secretariat of a dedicated webpage that listed the decisions submitted to the silence procedure for formal meetings with remote participation. She supported the proposed extension of the special procedures as contained in ECE/EX/2020/L.13. Further she inquired about the request for the secretariat to continue exploring ways to provide interpretation, as interpretation for meetings had resumed. She also requested clarification as to which business-critical decisions the CICPPP expected to take until 31 March 2021, as the Committee had adopted decisions in July 2020 and would not hold its next session until May 2021.

5. The secretariat clarified that currently UNOG could only provide a third of UNECE’s interpretation quota, resulting in most meetings being shortened or converted to informal meetings without interpretation, combined with a silence procedure for business-critical decisions. An additional proposal on how to remedy the situation would be tabled under agenda item 12.

6. The Director of the Economic Cooperation and Integration subprogramme explained that the expected business-critical decision for the CICPPP was the adoption of its Programme of Work (PoW) for 2021. If this adoption were delayed until the Committee’s session in May

2021, the subprogramme would have to operate without a PoW for the first months of 2021.

7. The Chair concluded that EXCOM adopts the decision of extension of special procedures during the COVID-19 period until 31 March 2021, as contained in ECE/EX/2020/L.13. EXCOM adopts the arrangements for the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships to conduct business remotely during the COVID-19 period as contained in ECE/EX/2020/L.14.

Item 4 - Matters relating to the Forum of Mayors.

8. The Chair recalled that UNECE had hosted the first Forum of Mayors (FoM) in October 2020. The concurrent session of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (CUDHLM) had been unable to reach consensus on agenda item 3 related to the FoM. Following informal consultations, the Committee had deferred the draft decision on the FoM to EXCOM. EXCOM had held informal consultations on the matter and was invited to approve a draft decision, as contained in ECE/EX/2020/L.16, with the understanding that it would supersede relevant prior decisions by the Committee. He thanked delegations for their active engagement in addressing this issue.

9. The representative of the Russian Federation did not object to the proposed decision and thanked the Bureau and the representative of Switzerland for their efforts in forging consensus and the Permanent Mission of Belarus for organizing the informal consultations. However, he expressed his disappointment at the rejection of an offer to host an UNECE event, especially after approval by the Bureau and in the absence of a competing offer. He thought such rejection to be politically motivated and considered this unacceptable.

10. The representative of the United States likewise thanked the Bureau and the representative of Switzerland. He said the proposed solution took into account the current situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and would ultimately strengthen the FoM. He supported the draft decision.

11. The representative of the European Union and its member States likewise thanked all involved in forging consensus and especially the representative of Switzerland, and welcomed the draft decision.

12. The representative of Ukraine said the FoM was an innovative tool to tackle the modern-day challenges – including pandemics, global warming and natural disasters – and support the multilateral efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the next decade. It allowed locally elected officials to complement the positions of national governments and present their perspectives on the most pressing issues on their agendas, including addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Ukraine hoped to see the FoM as truly inclusive, effective, and thought-provoking platform to discuss the above critical matters, with a right placement among a variety of the UNECE events and enjoying overarching support from member States. He appreciated the 2020 edition of the event, and its timeliness in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to build back better. He hoped future editions would address the broader variety of the sustainable development issues on a local level, thus assisting in fulfilling the UNECE mandate. He welcomed the draft decision and believed that an impartial and inclusive approach to all the design features was necessary to ensure the Forum's sustainability, usefulness, and efficiency.

13. The representative of Switzerland said the draft decision would allow for the organization of the FoM on a trial basis in 2022 as a self-standing event. EXCOM could decide in 2022 if it wished to extend the mandate of the FoM and determine if the objectives and format of the event needed to be modified.

14. The representative of the United Kingdom supported the decision. She said it would facilitate forward planning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, provide synergies between the FoM and the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (RFSD), and build on the success of the 2020 FoM.

15. The Chair concluded that EXCOM adopts the decision relating to the Forum of Mayors as contained in ECE/EX/2020/L.16.

Item 5 - Matters relating to the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management:

(a) Meeting with the Chair of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management;

16. The Chair of CUDHLM, Ms. Doris Andoni, made a presentation to EXCOM on the achievements of CES over the past year and its plans for the future. She invited EXCOM to approve the extension of the mandate of the Real Estate Market Advisory Group for 2021–2022 and adopt its revised terms of reference and its programme of work 2021–2022.

17. The representative of Belarus appreciated the second national policy review of Belarus by the Committee and the technical assistance provided done under the United 4 Smart Sustainable Cities initiative. He supported the decision tabled for EXCOM’s approval.

18. The representative of the European Union and its member States likewise supported the decision.

19. The representative of the United States likewise supported the decision. He said the work of the Committee was essential for all member States, especially in light of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on housing. He looked forward to the next session of the Committee and the discussions on cities facing extreme weather conditions. Recalling that several American cities had faced a record number of storms and wildfires in 2020, he welcomed the opportunity to learn from the experience of other member States on this topic.

20. The representative of the Russian Federation welcomed the interesting and substantial discussions at the FoM and the declaration that had been its outcome. He supported the work on energy efficiency in buildings, the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities and the preparation of city profiles. He expressed satisfaction that the profile for Nur-Sultan had already led to concrete results and attracted additional investments. He supported the decision tabled for EXCOM’s approval.

21. The representative of Switzerland appreciated the success of the FoM and the SDG 11 Day and thanked the secretariat for their efforts in preparing these events. He also appreciated the work on smart sustainable cities and the support to national and local governments in responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. He supported the decision tabled for EXCOM’s approval.

22. The Director of the Housing and Land Management subprogramme recalled that the Committee was supported by only 2 Professional staff at the secretariat, and appreciated the contributions of the Bureau and the experts, which allowed the Committee to achieve such significant results.

23. The Chair of CUDHLM recalled that the Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence were another achievement of the Committee and that more and more of these Centres were being established.

24. The Chair concluded that EXCOM thanks the Chair of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management for the comprehensive report. EXCOM appreciates being informed about the activities and achievements of the Conference and being kept aware of future directions of its work.

(b) Meeting with the Chair of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management;

25. The Chair concluded that EXCOM approves the extension of the mandate of the Real Estate Market Advisory Group for the period 2021–2022 and adopts its revised terms of reference as contained in document ECE/HBP/2020/8 and its programme of work 2021–2022 as contained in document ECE/HBP/2020/9.

Item 6 – Matters relating to the Protocol on Water and Health.

26. The Executive Secretary recalled that UNECE serviced the Protocol on Water and Health together with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and that this instrument helped ensure equal access to water and sanitation, which was a key factor in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The UNECE Regular Budget only provided for 30 per cent of the time of one P-4 to service the Protocol, which was insufficient for the workload. Thus, the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol had, in November 2019, requested the Secretary-General to “increase the support by UNECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries”. Given that this request entitled financial implications, the Executive Secretary explained that it would have to be transmitted by the Commission to the Economic and Social Council, accompanied by a Programme Budget Implication document. She underlined that the secretariat would not be able to deliver on the extended mandate of the Protocol without additional resources and invited EXCOM to submit the matter onward to the Commission.

27. The representative of the Russian Federation did not object to the relevant draft decision tabled for EXCOM approval and said that the Protocol was an important instrument for ensuring effective regional cooperation in providing access to clean drinking water, implementing sanitary measures for effective use of water resources and improving water quality and health. He noted that these activities were even more in demand given the COVID-19 pandemic.

28. The representative of the United States found the Protocol to be a successful instrument but could not support the decision tabled for EXCOM’s approval due to his government’s policy of zero nominal growth in the UN Regular Budget. He said he would welcome a proposal

that was cost neutral or subject to availability of extrabudgetary resources.

29. The representative of the European Union and its member States appreciated the Protocol. In light of the ongoing liquidity crisis and the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, she said she would welcome further information on how the resources for the P-4 position would be used and whether there would be a reallocation of resources in view of the unsuccessful previous request for an additional P-5 post to service the Water Convention. She wondered whether it might not be beneficial to consider re-prioritizing UNECE activities, which could free up resources for the Protocol.

30. The representative of Switzerland said the Protocol was an important instrument and noted that the request for additional resources had been motivated by a constant increase in the number of Parties and the growing requests for assistance by the latter as well as by acceding countries. He welcomed the prospect of additional resources for the Protocol, as this would for full implementation of an extended mandate, support a growing membership, and contribute to an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

31. The Executive Secretary noted that the programme of work of the Protocol for 2020-2022 had foreseen an extrabudgetary post at P-4 level to serve as co-secretary to the Protocol in case regular budget resources for such a post were not available. She asked delegations for their support in obtaining these extrabudgetary resources, noting that mobilizing both the relevant line ministries, the ministries of foreign affairs and development agencies would be necessary as the focal points for the Protocol in governments were often technical experts without the skills or connections needed to raise funds.

32. The Chair concluded that EXCOM takes note of the request of the Meeting of the Parties to the Secretary-General to “increase the support by ECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries”.

INFORMAL SEGMENT

Item 7 – Preparations for the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe

33. The Secretary of the Commission said that member States had been refining the draft decisions and the high-level statement to be submitted to the consideration of the Commission in informal consultations. The next such consultation would be on 13 January 2021, with a view to tabling the documents for approval by the 113th meeting of EXCOM on 22 January 2021. She noted that the draft agenda, in particular, should if possible be adopted at that meeting in order to meet the translation deadlines set by conference services.

34. The Executive Secretary recalled that member States were invited to submit voluntary commitments related to the theme of the Commission session. She believed that a strong set of such commitments, with measurable, numerical/percentage targets, could make a significant contribution to advancing circular economy and the sustainable management of resources in the region, as well as to achieving the SDGs. The secretariat stood ready to help develop voluntary commitments as appropriate.

35. The representative of the European Union and its member States said that going forward,

the priority of the member States should be to agree on the list of sectoral areas and initiatives that would be the focus of their cooperation on circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in the region.

36. The representative of Switzerland said that he would continue his discussions with the secretariat on the voluntary commitments, in the spirit of the commitments taken under the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy.

37. The Chair concluded that EXCOM thanks the secretariat for the update on the preparation of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission and looks forward to further periodic updates on this matter.

Item 8 - Preparations for the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2021 and extension of its mandate

38. The Chair invited EXCOM to approve the onward submission to the 69th Commission session of a draft decision on the extension of the mandate for the RFSD and an evaluation prepared pursuant to decision B(68) of the Commission. He also invited EXCOM to approve the draft agenda for the 2021 RFSD and thanked delegations for their active contributions to refining these documents at informal consultations.

39. The representatives of the European Union and its member States, the Russian Federation, Belarus, and the Republic of Moldova supported the decisions as proposed by the Chair.

40. The representative of Switzerland supported the decisions as proposed by the Chair. He welcomed the publication of a yearly report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region prior to each year's RFSD, which he thought would provide a strong basis for the discussions at the event.

41. The representative of the United Kingdom supported the recommendations in the evaluation to for drawing out the unique value added of the RFSD and said it was important to send clear messages to the High-level Political Forum via the chair's summary of the event. She welcomed the efforts to enhance the participation of external stakeholders, as the involvement of civil society was key for achieving the SDGs. She supported the decisions as proposed by the Chair. She welcomed the opportunity to maximize links between the RFSD and the UNECE work on data through the knowledge hub on the SDGs and the UNECE Roadmap on Statistics for the SDGs.

42. The Chair concluded that EXCOM agrees to submit to the consideration of the 69th session of the Commission the draft decision on the extension of the mandate to convene the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, as contained in informal document 2020/53, and the evaluation of the Regional Forum as contained in informal document 2020/54. EXCOM approves the provisional agenda of the 2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development as contained in ECE/RFSD/2021/1.

Item 9 - 2022 Evaluation plan

43. The Executive Secretary presented the 2022 Evaluation Workplan for the approval of EXCOM.

44. The Chair concluded that EXCOM approves the ECE Evaluation Workplan for 2022 as contained in informal document 2020/55.

Item 10 - Proposed programme budget for 2022

45. The Executive Secretary presented the proposed UNECE programme budget for 2022 to EXCOM for comments, recalling that this document was now prepared on an annual basis pursuant to A/RES/72/266 and that deliberations on it would take place at the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the 5th Committee of the General Assembly.

46. The representative of the Russian Federation said that the switch to an annual budget cycle deprived member States of the opportunity to contribute to the draft programme budget, as the timing of annual meetings did not allow all UNECE subsidiary committees to deliberate on the proposed Programme of Work. In fact, in many cases, the Programme of Work was presented to these bodies after having been approved in New York. This was not optimal. He also emphasized that the Permanent Mission in Geneva had had only one week to examine the lengthy draft document. He proposed that the modalities for preparing this document be modified so that UNECE expert bodies, or at least their Bureaux, depending on the timing of their annual meetings, be able to provide substantive inputs. This would allow for greater transparency and inclusiveness and he was ready to work on a relevant EXCOM decision with interested delegations. He would discuss the proposed programme budget for 2022 with the Permanent Mission of his country in New York as suggested by the Executive Secretary. He emphasized however that the New York missions could never be fully cognizant of all the nuances of UNECE's work. Regarding the proposed programme budget for 2022, he objected to the use therein of the words "environmental democracy" as this was not internationally agreed terminology. Furthermore, he found the key tasks of the Sustainable Energy subprogramme unbalanced, as aspects of SDG 7 other than reducing CO₂ emissions were not fully reflected. He noted that an in-depth discussion on these matters on a global level would complicate agreement on the budget and said it would be better if they could be discussed in Geneva.

47. The representative of the United States supported the proposal of the representative of the Russian Federation, saying it would allow UNECE subsidiary bodies to provide more substantive input. He sought clarification as to the rules governing conflict of interest and the engagement of the private sector in UNECE bodies and requested the secretariat to arrange for consultations on this matter. For background, he requested the secretariat to prepare an overview on what rules currently existed to prevent conflicts of interest in expert groups, and queried if those rules are standardized across UNECE, and how they are monitored and enforced. He hoped these consultations could be organized sufficiently in advance of the Commission session to allow for the development of a potential draft decision for the session, as appropriate.

48. The representative of the European Union and its member States likewise wished for more opportunities for member States to guide the Programmes of Work within subprogrammes, and saw the change to an annual budgetary cycle as an opportunity to review timelines and internal procedures so that the input of member States could be incorporated. She also noted that there was not a harmonized set of rules on appropriate cooperation with the private sector across UNECE subsidiary bodies, despite the risk of reputational damage due to

a potential conflict of interest or unclear ethics rules. She hoped the secretariat could prepare some relevant suggestions and organize consultations on the matter.

49. The representative of the United Kingdom said she would likewise welcome the opportunity to provide substantive input at an earlier stage of budget preparation.

50. The Executive Secretary said she would also like to see more input from the UNECE subsidiary bodies in the budget and appreciated the recommendation from member States to review relevant timelines and processes. Regarding engagement with the private sector and potential conflicts of interest, she recalled that EXCOM had approved a UNECE Framework for the Engagement with the business sector (informal document 2017/40) at its 93rd meeting but expressed her willingness to work with member States to improve this document.

51. The Chair concluded that discussions on the preparation of the programme budget and on engagement with the private sector would continue at informal consultations. EXCOM takes note of the proposed programme budget for 2022. EXCOM encourages delegations to liaise with their counterparts in New York in order to ensure that their views are well represented at the budget discussions at UN headquarters.

Item 11 – Extrabudgetary projects (for approval)

52. The Chair concluded that EXCOM approves the extrabudgetary project contained in informal document 2020/57.

Item 12 - Important new developments: Briefing by the Executive Secretary

53. Recalling the request issued by EXCOM in April 2020 (upon adoption of special procedures for the COVID-19 period) for the secretariat “to continue exploring possible solutions to the issue of interpretation in remote meetings in accordance with Rules of procedure 18 and 19, with a view of proposing solutions to the membership as soon as possible,” the Executive Secretary presented a proposal for an additional meeting room at UNOG where UNECE would have priority booking. She noted that informal document 2020/58 presented an indicative costing for such a room and explained that it would allow the secretariat to hold more meetings and thus lessen the impact of current servicing constraints on programmatic delivery. She invited governments to consider providing the relevant extrabudgetary funds. The cost to UNECE would be on the order of USD 9,000 for a Regular Budget meetings and an additional USD 12,000 for an extrabudgetary meeting.

54. The representative of the European Union and its member States commended UNECE for its efforts to adapt to the restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Given these restrictions and the strain on national budgets, she suggested to also explore other options in case no donors could be found to fund the Executive Secretary’s proposal. She said re-prioritizing UNECE activities based on discussions with member States could be a way to move forward.

55. The representative of the Russian Federation asked why the staff interpreters of UNOG would not be involved for meetings held in such a room, and inquired which time period the proposal would cover.

56. In response to the representative of the European Union and its member States, the Executive Secretary said the secretariat had carried out a prioritization exercise when submitting a revised and reduced calendar of official meetings for the 4th quarter 2020, and subsequently for the 1st quarter 2021, to UNOG. This would not meet all needs of UNECE. Therefore, the secretariat was exploring other options in order to deliver on its mandate to the fullest extent possible. In response to the Russian Federation, she said that UNOG did not disclose the specific amount of its conference servicing budget allocated to UNECE, and furthermore that UNOG's own budget was impacted by the liquidity crisis and the additional constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, UNOG staff interpreters could not be allocated to the proposed room. She encouraged delegations to liaise directly with UNOG to obtain further clarifications on this issue.

57. The Secretary of the Commission further clarified that UNOG was currently able to service only a third of the officially approved calendar of UNECE meetings. The secretariat had tried to reduce the number of meetings via prioritization, had instituted special procedures for business continuity, and had taken transformed the meetings of lower level governance bodies into informal consultations without interpretation. While this ensured business continuity, these measures did not suffice to fulfil UNECE's full Programme of Work. Hybrid meetings had not yet proven to be a fully satisfactory alternative to regular meetings with full interpretation. If the extrabudgetary funds were secured, the secretariat would need some lead time in order to identify and organize the meetings that would most benefit from this arrangement. She also specified that there were certain meetings which were suited to virtual formats. Further to earlier discussions in EXCOM, the secretariat would in due time present member States with a menu of options to inform further discussions among the membership on future meeting servicing arrangements, including different formats that may be considered going forward.

58. The Chair suggested that the issue be further discussed in bilateral consultations. The secretariat and the Bureau would try to prepare a more detailed proposal, in order to provide additional guidance to prospective donors.

Item 13 – Any other business

59. The representative of the Republic of Moldova commended both the secretariat and the member States for the progress achieved in 2020 despite the difficult circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her government stood ready to contribute to the RFSD and the 69th Commission session and supported the focus on circular economy.

60. In response to a query by the Greek delegation, the Secretary of the Commission clarified how the silence procedure for formal meetings with remote participation was being applied. Thus far, the procedure had been upheld for all meetings under its purview.

61. The Chair of the Commission thanked the secretariat, and in particular the Executive Secretary and the Secretary of the Commission for their support of the Executive Committee throughout the year.
