

Information note by the secretariat

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

(as of 17 May 2021)

This note was prepared by the UNECE secretariat to inform member States about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing liquidity crisis of the Regular Budget on its meeting servicing arrangements. It follows earlier updates on this issue, including those contained in Informal Documents [2020/49](#) and [2020/58](#) that were presented to the Executive Committee in October and December 2020, respectively. The Executive Secretary of UNECE briefed the membership orally on the matter at the 116th meeting of EXCOM on 17 May 2021.

Background

1. In July 2020, UNECE was informed that the capacity of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) to service meetings of Geneva-based entities was severely limited, due to a combination of COVID-19 response measures and financial constraints triggered by the liquidity crisis of the Regular Budget.
2. As a consequence, the quota for meeting services allocated to UNECE was reduced from three to only one meeting a day with interpretation. Due to technical constraints, hybrid sessions were usually limited to two-hour timeslots, compared to the traditional three-hour formats of onsite meetings. This meant that UNECE had to reduce its interpreted sessions from 18 hours to 4-6 hours per day.
3. These restrictions have been in place since August 2020 and forced the secretariat to reprioritize its official calendar of meetings significantly. Regrettably, in May 2021, UNECE was informed by UNOG that the restrictions would be extended again through the third quarter of 2021 (July – September 2021).
4. According to UNOG, a second room can be made available as of July 2021, but only on the condition that UNECE staff is able to take on the technical moderation role. This arrangement would be an additional responsibility for UNECE that would stretch many of its already understaffed teams. In the interest of maximizing capacity, the secretariat will nonetheless consider to what extent UNECE may be able to avail of this arrangement in the short term. However, this interim backstopping modality, born out of *force majeure* circumstances, cannot be accepted as a precedent for the future. Under the current support arrangements, the responsibility for servicing UNECE meetings rests with the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) and UNOG. If evolving needs change

the profile of this servicing portfolio, a new arrangement has to be found in close consultation with all partners involved.

5. In light of the above, UNECE is currently reviewing its official calendar of meetings for the third quarter 2021. In doing so, UNECE 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 UNECE region.

Impact of the reduced meeting servicing support

6. While the secretariat has tried to minimize the impact of this reduction in meeting services, unfortunately it is not possible to offer the same service as before under these conditions. Generally, the secretariat has sought 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. The flexibility of the membership, including the adoption of special procedures during the COVID-19 period, have helped to mitigate the situation and enabled business continuity. Nonetheless, the extensive and longlasting service reductions have adversely affected UNECE's ability to deliver on its mandated activities:

- a) Meetings have been shortened, if not postponed or cancelled entirely.
- b) Due to time constraints, formal meeting agendas have been limited to business-critical items only.
- c) Other agenda items have been moved to English-only side events or informal meetings.
- d) In some cases, decisions had to be pre-negotiated through several English-only informal sessions ahead of the formal meeting. The same was true to prepare planning of the implementation of the subprogramme programmes of work. This process was time-consuming for both the secretariat and the member States.
- e) The limitations of the technical platforms have hampered the interaction between member States. Sometimes written statements had to be shared in the meeting chat instead of being delivered orally.
- f) The limitations of the technical platforms have not allowed for breakout rooms / bilateral consultations or negotiations.
- g) Presiding over meetings has become more stressful for meeting chairs and secretaries, who have to monitor the technical platform and keep an eye on interventions posted in the meeting chat in addition to focusing on the discussions.
- h) Capacity development impact has been reduced as training cannot always be conducted online with the same effectiveness.

6. The Annex contains some specific impact examples from different subprogrammes, covering the period from August 2020 (the start of the restrictions) to May 2021. This list is illustrative only and does not seek to document the full scope of the adverse effects caused by the service reductions.

Next steps

- Should Member States be in a position to provide supplementary funding for the servicing of meetings with full interpretation and the option of remote participation to address the current servicing constraints, the secretariat stands ready to discuss options in further detail.
- The secretariat also encourages delegations to make their views heard on this matter, so that these can be conveyed convey both to UNECE's service provider UNOG and DGACM and to the financial bodies in New York who manage the allocation of RB funds during the liquidity crisis.
- UNECE continues its discussions with counterparts in UNOG and at UN Headquarters to discuss this difficult situation which is becoming more and more untenable.

ANNEX: Examples of the impact of reduced meeting servicing support on UNECE activities

Subprogramme 1 – Environment

24th meeting of the Aarhus Convention Working Group of the Parties, originally scheduled for 1-3 July 2020, was split in two parts due to lack of quota for interpretation and availability of meeting rooms equipped for remote interpretation. This meeting was a major milestone for negotiating a number of documents for the 7th Meeting of the Parties (MoP). No decisions could be taken during the sessions on 1-3 July (E only) due to lack of interpretation, and the decision-making was delayed to October. Furthermore, official 3-hour sessions on 28-29 October were reduced to 2-hours. Since it was not possible to reduce the length of the substantive agenda, XB funds had to be raised to fill the gap for interpretation of additional hours.

8th meeting of the Protocol on PRTRs Working Group of the Parties (16-18 December 2020): This meeting was a major milestone for negotiating a number of documents for the 4th MoP. Official 3-hour sessions were reduced to 2-hours. Since it was not possible to reduce the length of the substantive agenda, XB funds had to be raised to fill the gap for interpretation of additional hours.

7th meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information (16-17 November 2020), 13th meeting Task Force on Access to Justice (15-16 February 2021) and 9th meeting of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making (1-2 March 2021). Official 3-hour sessions were reduced to 2-hours for each meeting. As a result, the number of subjects that had to be addressed and the possibility to share country experiences and learn from peers were reduced significantly. The impact of this is particularly serious as the events focused on the following critical subjects: transparency and digital transformation to support a green and circular economy, biosafety and community resilience; effective access to justice for cases relating to air quality; decision-making on the extractive industries, on energy, and on geoengineering; and participation of vulnerable and marginalized groups in decision-making.

The Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management in September 2020 (15th meeting) as well as in April 2021 (16th meeting) had to be significantly shortened, which led to deleting some foreseen agenda items, cutting of discussion time and high stress for the chairs due to the tight agenda. In addition, several workshops had to be postponed such as the global workshop on climate change from September 2020 to March 2021.

11th Conference of the Parties to the Industrial Accidents Convention (7-9 December 2020) had to be delayed and reduced in duration, from 2.5 days to 6 hours. Additional resources were required to organize an advance information session and an online seminar, as preparatory events. These resources were provided by the former host country. In addition, several planned regional/national workshops to build capacity also had to be postponed. Preparatory online events were organized, such as an online teaser event for South-Eastern Europe, to prepare countries for a sub-regional workshop on land-use planning and industrial safety.

Subprogramme 2 – Transport

65% of planned deliverables were implemented in 2020. Roughly half of the delivered intergovernmental meetings were under *informal* remote formats, without interpretation. These impacts are described in more detail in [ECE/TRANS/2021/5](#).

Despite these difficulties, in 2020, the secretariat serviced 20 Working Parties, 10 Administrative Committees and seven Groups of Experts for amending, acceding to and implementing the existing 59 UN conventions/agreements on inland transport administered by ECE, and forging new conventions/agreements, protocols and resolutions.

However, this situation is not sustainable and the Inland Transport Committee and its Bureau have expressed urgent calls to address the situation. According to the latest (from ECE/TRANS/304):

21. The Committee **was informed** about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the liquidity crisis on the implementation of the Committee's programme of work (ECE/TRANS/2021/5). **Noting with concern** the extraordinary circumstances, including the pandemic and liquidity crisis, limiting support services that are essential for the delivery of the Committee's Programme of Work and thus impacting the quality of services provided to member States and contracting parties of United Nations transport legal instruments on inland transport under the purview of the Committee:

(a) **expressed its appreciation to** the secretariat and the Bureau for its extraordinary efforts and achievements in adjusting its methods of work to ensure business continuity and for the provision of unplanned critical services to its core constituents;

(b) **reiterated** the critical importance of the *full* servicing of the programmatic activities included in the Programme of Work of the Committee, supporting inter alia its subsidiary bodies and Treaty Bodies (Administrative Committees), for sustainable transport and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; and

(c) **urged all relevant actors** to assign high priority and support the return to normal provision of services (meetings, interpretation, translation) and standard methods of work for these programmatic activities as soon as epidemiologically and organizationally feasible.

22. Furthermore, the Committee **requested** its Chair to convey in his report to the Executive Committee (EXCOM) the contributions of the transport pillar of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) to its pandemic response in line with ECE/TRANS/2021/4 and the concerns of the Committee concerning the impacts of the ongoing situation on the Committee's constituents and functions, as well as the urgency and high stakes of the return to the normal provision of services.

Some specific examples of impact are as follows:

Group of Experts towards Unified Railway Law: Was reduced to 8 hours (22%) of its planned 36 hours meetings in 2020. One meeting was postponed from Sept 2020 to Jan 2021 and caused one year delay of submission of its outcome to the SC.2.

Group of Experts on Conceptual and Technical Aspects of Computerization of the TIR Procedure (WP.30/GE.1): The planned meetings on eTIR specifications could not be organized in 2020 and delayed approval of the eTIR specifications, which resulted in delayed deployment of the eTIR International System at least one year.

Working Party on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (WP.15): 18 official meetings with interpretation of 3 hours each originally scheduled between September 2020 and July 2021 received only 8 official meetings with interpretation of 2 hours each, and resulted in 70 % reduction in meeting time with interpretation.

ECOSOC Sub-Committee of Experts on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals and ECOSOC Sub-Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods: Overall, despite the mitigation measures taken (i.e: combining the official and informal sessions) these bodies lost 50% and 36.2 % of the time initially allocated to their work in 2020 respectively.

Subprogramme 3 – Statistics

Work Session on Migration Statistics was planned as a meeting of 2½ days (15 hours) with English, French and Russian interpretation, to be held back-to-back with a capacity development workshop on migration statistics for EECCA countries of 1½ days (9 hours) with English-Russian interpretation. Rooms and interpretation were to be provided by UNOG. Instead the two events were merged into one online meeting over 3 days, 3 hours on each day (total 9 hours), with English-Russian interpretation, all cost covered from extra-budgetary source. Impact: French not interpreted; meeting duration reduced by 15 hours; less experience shared because of shorter time; capacity development impact reduced as training cannot be conducted online with the same effectiveness.

Plenary of the Conference of European Statisticians in June 2021: Planned 5 sessions (15 hours with interpretation) will now be reduced to 4 hours of official hybrid meeting with interpretation, and 3 hours informal meeting in English only – twice less meeting time and almost 4 times less interpretation.

The Expert Meeting on Statistics for SDGs: The Statistical Division had to pay interpretation fully from extrabudgetary sources (4 sessions x 2 hours). In previous years interpretation was provided by Conference Services as this has the status of an official meeting.

Workshop on Informal Economy for EECCA and SEE countries - planned to be a physical workshop of 3 full days but converted into three online sessions on 22-26 March 2021, each of about 3 hours length. Considerable reduction in the length of the workshop. Interpretation financed from external source.

Meeting of Standing Expert Group on National Accounts: The meeting was converted from 3-4 full days (in person) into six online sessions on 17-27 May 2021. As no interpretation is provided by UNOG, it will be financed from external sources.

Subprogramme 4 – Economic cooperation and integration

2020 annual session of the Team of Specialists on Innovation and Competitiveness Policies (October 2020): Had to be replaced by informal online consultations of 7 hours instead of the usual 12 hours of annual sessions. No interpretation was provided by UNOG. Interpretation into Russian could be financed via extrabudgetary resources. The policy dialogue had to be curtailed significantly, and the exchange of experience and good practices among member States was much more limited than in previous years. Moreover, because of the informal nature of the consultations, no decisions could be taken and instead of a report of the meeting a chair's summary was circulated. Because of the informal nature of the consultations, neither the chair's summary nor the documents for the meetings could be translated.

2021 annual session of the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships (June 2021): Will have to be organized as a hybrid meeting of 10 hours instead of the usual 15 hours. This reduction comes after the 2020 session had to be cancelled altogether because of the pandemic. As a result, the exchange of experience and good practices will remain much more limited than in years past.

2020 annual session of the Working Party on Public-Private Partnerships (December 2020) had to be held in hybrid format, with 4 hours only instead of the usual 12. Substantive discussions on key issues had to be significantly curtailed, which resulted in a number of unfinished discussions (for example, on the evaluation methodology and capacity building, where the latter had to be skipped completely due to lack of time). Furthermore, there was no time for the session to adopt its report as per requirements, so the report had to be adopted after the session. Besides the additional work, this caused additional interactions and prolonged report adoption by at least 8 weeks.

Subprogramme 5 – Sustainable Energy

Under subprogramme 5, the approach and format of many meetings had to be modified. The length of the Committee on Sustainable Energy meeting and the annual sessions of four groups of experts were reduced by 50% (equivalent to 42 hours) and were conducted in hybrid format. The Committee conducted its negotiations informally in an English-only session.

For the 12th session of the **Expert Group on Resource Management**, alternative arrangements had to be made to compensate for the reduction of 22 hours with interpretation resulting in a significant amount of extra work having to be undertaken by the secretariat. It would not have been possible to conduct the meeting with only four sessions out of 10 having interpretation.

It was also not possible to hold the meetings of the **Groups of Experts on Coal Mine Methane and on Gas** back to back as originally planned, meaning that synergistic discussions and collaboration on common areas of work including on the proposal to launch an International Decade of Methane Management were no longer possible. These discussions have had to be conducted separately, again increasing the workload for the secretariat.

Subprogramme 6 - Trade

Under this subprogramme, it was observed that there was reduced engagement from some delegations, likely as a direct consequence of the lack of interpretation. Many French- and Russian-speaking delegations did not fully participate in meetings that had to be held in English only, e.g. in the work on new or revised standards in Specialized Sections, or opted out entirely – contrary to their engagement in previous years.

The reduced length of hybrid sessions to 2 hours made it impossible for member States to go through the full agenda as envisaged. The accumulated backlog will probably take one or even two years to clear.

Subprogramme 7 – Forests and the forest industry

78th session of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry (4-6 November 2020): The session saw limited time for in-session and panel discussions, no or very limited time for consultations or negotiations in bilateral/informal settings on specific topics. The chat box of the online platform took a key role; it needs to be constantly monitored and moderated or delegations need to be prepared well in advance.

42nd session of the Joint UNECE/FAO Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management (22-24 March 2021): The overall meeting time of the plenary was reduced by 33%. Some of the regular and core parts of the meeting were excluded from the plenary and presented in English-only side events during the lunch breaks (e.g. presentations by the Teams of Specialists and the work implemented by the secretariat). The technical limitations of the meeting interface (Interprefy) made it difficult to have discussions among participants and the Chair of the session needed to play a key role in summarizing the main parts of the input received by member States mostly in the Chat. Interactions between member States remained limited. Well in advance of the meeting, Member States requested the secretariat to receive very detailed information about the structure and flow of the various sessions, to better prepare written statements in the chat.

Subprogramme 8 – Housing, land management and population

81st session of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (7-9 October 2020) was held in hybrid format and reduced by 6 hours total. The reduction did not allow to organize deliberations between member States and stakeholders on several programmatic topics, including on country profiles, centres of excellence, land administration. As a consequence, seven Informal Briefings had to be organized in English only to negotiate draft decisions of the Committee session. Several additional informal meetings had to be organized to prepare planning of the implementation of the subprogramme programme of work; also in English only. As a result, there were many more meetings – the process was much more time-consuming for all and less inclusive due to limited multilingualism provisions.

12th session of the Working Party on Land Administration (21 May-1 June 2021): The session will be reduced by 4 hours. A segment involving feedback and interaction with participants/ breakout groups that would have facilitated inputs for future studies and activities in the Programme of Work had to be removed, both because of the reduction in hours but also because of the limitations of the technology being used.

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