

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Item 6

Informal Document 2022/3

Conference servicing arrangements:

Options paper for the servicing of UNECE meetings in the first six months of 2022

(Updated, as of 17 January 2022)

Note by the Secretariat

I. Background

1. Following informal briefings by the UNECE secretariat and the United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG), on 16 December 2021, the 119th meeting of the Executive Committee considered the conference servicing arrangements during the COVID-19 situation: “In light of the ongoing pandemic and the reduced availability of conference facilities during the renovation of the Palais des Nations, it notes with concern that there are currently no provisions to cover the additional costs related to hybrid meetings in 2022, including for the technical moderation, that may be required to ensure business continuity. EXCOM requests the secretariat to elaborate options to address the situation for consideration at its next meeting.”

2. This note was prepared by the UNECE secretariat in response to this request, based on information available as of 17 January 2022 **If requested, the secretariat stands ready to hold informal consultations on the options presented to facilitate decision-making on this important and urgent matter.**

II. Meeting servicing arrangements - guidance provided by UNOG

3. On 29 December 2021, UNOG’s Division of Conference Management (DCM) informally informed client entities on 29 December 2021 that given the current critical epidemiological situation, they

“expect that the extended use of virtual/hybrid meeting activity will continue into the first half of 2022 and likely even beyond. The calendar planning for the first six months of the year has been based on this scenario. DCM will regularly review and adjust planning accordingly as the situation evolves.

UNOG will be continuing in 2022 with the planned calendar meetings, including with use of RSI (remote simultaneous interpretation) platforms for remote participation. For 2022, in-person meetings and those with less than 30 minutes of remote participation will remain at three hours, while those with more than 30 minutes of remote participation will be provided with 2 hours of interpretation. COVID-related public health measures in conference rooms will remain, including limits on occupancy.

The use of RSI platforms for remote participation remain an unmandated activity connected to business continuity measures with no provisions in the regular budget of 2022. The need to finance the costs associated with RSI platform use has been discussed centrally. **On December 22nd, the Controller laid out an overall plan for 2022 for tracking related expenditures, which will eventually be charged to conference organizing entities. The details of the cost recovery remain to be elaborated. In due course, this information will be communicated to the Heads of Entity through the Office of the Controller.**

To minimize platform costs and optimize use of staff resources supporting remote participation, UNOG DoA has decided that Zoom will be the default RSI platform for all hybrid meetings, until further notice. The choice of Zoom is based on its financially advantageous pricing model, not proportional to the time usage, while at the same time being by large the most used platform at UNOG, requiring minimal training and support for participants. In addition, the current UN Secretariat contracts with Interprefy, KUDO and Interact.io will expire at the end of March 2022 and it is not sure if they will be renewed. An ITB evaluation of RSI platforms is currently ongoing, which may result in new contracts with new platforms being established in April 2022. The availability of Zoom is guaranteed throughout this period, and a system contract for Zoom is available for all Secretariat Offices. As the contractual situation evolves, UNOG will be re-evaluating this choice as well as assessing new platforms, if and when they become available. Please

note that to ensure the stability of the environment, performance and quality support of the complex audiovisual technical architecture and configuration established in conference rooms at UNOG, only UNOG DoA personnel is authorized to operate the equipment, including hardware, software and licenses.”

4. UNOG will provide client entities with further information about the conference servicing arrangements as well as plans for handling the coming closure of Building E conference rooms, at the information meeting on 27 January 2022.

III. Operational implications for UNECE

5 In line with the planning parameters provided by UNOG, the UNECE secretariat has reprioritized the Official Calendar of Meetings for UNECE, initially for the first six months of 2022. The secretariats of the subsidiary bodies of UNECE contributed actively to this exercise.

- (a) The **revised calendar for the first half of 2022**, submitted to UNOG for processing on 25 November 2021, foresees a total of 421 meetings, all planned in hybrid format, combining in room and remote participation options.
- (b) **Meeting duration:** In line with the time limitations stipulated by UNOG for remote interpretation (for meetings with more than 30 minutes of remote participation will be provided with 2 hours of interpretation), 200 of the meetings will be held as two hour sessions only. Compared to the regular interpretation capacity provided to UNECE, this constitutes a reduction in interpreted meeting time of 200 hours for the first six months of 2022.

IV. Resource requirements for 2022

6. At the time of drafting of this note, UNECE was informed by UNOG that the planning assumptions and related financial data provided by UNOG in November 2021 are under review, among others, due to the decision to transition to the Zoom platform.

- (a) The total estimated cost of ensuring business continuity for ECE official calendar of meetings in 2022 is estimated at \$984,500, on the basis of an additional cost of \$1,100 per two-hour meeting with 50 remote participants for 895 intergovernmental meetings during the year.
- (b) As advised on 14 January 2022, UNOG will provide technical moderation for all RSI meetings of UNECE, effective 1 March 2022. This is a change from the arrangements in place since September 2021, where UNECE staff had, at the request of UNOG, contributed to this moderating function to increase the number of meetings that could be held under pandemic condition. .^a

Funding Arrangements in 2020/2021:

7. Thanks to the exceptional decision of the Controller to fund the additional costs arising from remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) meetings to ensure business continuity, UNECE

^a Due to the evolving planning arrangements and the volatile pandemic situation, the data provided is approximate. It is provided to illustrate the order of magnitude of the requirements.

The secretariat will further review the initial planning assumptions for the Calendar of meetings 2022 (derived from past practice and standing entitlements) that were supplemented with a 100% hybrid support in the last quarter of 2021. This review will seek to establish how, in light of the current pandemic situation, adjustments to the total meeting number/formats and servicing arrangements could be considered by ECE subsidiary bodies. The secretariat will keep the membership apprised of further developments.

has been able to continue its operations, albeit under a reduced calendar of official meetings and with significantly reduced meeting duration (two hours instead of three hours for meetings with more than 30 minutes of remote participation). The additional resources to cover RSI meetings in 2020 and 2021 were provided through sections 2 and 29E of the regular budget, in line with the mandates of the Department of General Assembly and Conference Services (DGACM) and of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) to support conference services, administrative and support services to entities in Geneva.

Envisaged funding arrangements for 2022:

8. On 24 November 2021, during informal discussions with ECE member States, representatives from UNOG and DGACM have informed that “starting in January 2022, support for remote participation can only be provided on a cost recovery basis until such time as a central business continuity solution may be found for the remainder of the pandemic, or until a mandate is in place.”

9. On 6 December 2021, the Executive Secretary contacted the Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and the Controller to alert them to the fact that this decision puts at risk the continuity of mandated official meetings and the implementation of the programme of work of Programme 17, Economic development in Europe. Further to resolution 76/245 of 24 December 2021, Section 20 appropriation for 2022, amounts to \$1,480,300 for non-post resources (4.2% of \$35,509,100). 60% of the proposed non-post resources (\$886,200) comprise of fixed costs relating to replacement of IT equipment or provision of services by UNOG.

10. The Executive Secretary advised that UNECE will not be in a position to cover the additional cost for RSI meetings.

Options

11. In light of the above and further to the EXCOM request to elaborate option on the way forward, member States may wish to consider the below five options to address the situation:

Option A: Continuation of hybrid meeting formats – exceptionally funded from Regular Budget under business continuity provisions

This option is currently not foreseen at UNHQ.

(Pls refer to para 3 above that stipulates UNOG the end of 2021, “On December 22nd, the Controller laid out an overall plan for 2022 for tracking related expenditures, which will eventually be charged to conference organizing entities. The details of the cost recovery remain to be elaborated. In due course, this information will be communicated to the Heads of Entity through the Office of the Controller.”)

Option B: Request for RB funding through additional Mandate and Programme Budget Implications

Such an option would not be available in 2022.

UNECE had been advised by UNHQ that any decision from the Executive Committee mandating RSI meetings and entailing programme budget implications, would need to go

through ECOSOC before being presented to the Fifth Committee, and therefore would not be applicable before 1 January 2023.

Option C: Resumption of “in room only” meeting formats (fully funded under RB)

UNOG has resumed the servicing on three UNECE meetings per day, as per the established servicing envelope for UNECE. This is the default support arrangement for UNECE’s official calendar of meetings and fully funded under existing servicing mandates/budgets.

- However, ongoing travel restrictions and protective measures of the pandemic response are currently not conducive to a full return to the established “in room only” format that requires participation of representatives not based in Geneva.
- Additionally, the limited availability of conference rooms during the Strategic Heritage Plan (SHP) would likely reduce the capacity to hold in room meetings in Geneva. (UNOG will update on the latest planning parameters for the renovation of the Palais des Nations in late-January.)

Option D: Off-site meetings held outside of Geneva (XB from hosting country)

Should the funding gap for hybrid meetings persist and mindful of the limited availability of conference rooms during the SHP, member States could consider if meetings could be held outside of Geneva, with the host country agreement including provisions for hybrid meeting servicing and coverage of all related costs. Such an option would need to be discussed on a case-by-case basis with the Bureau/secretariat of the respective subsidiary body.

- This option would likely not cover the full official calendar of meetings.
- Based on past experience, such an arrangement requires a long planning timeline to allow for commensurate consultations with the host country.

Option E: Extrabudgetary project to fund additional costs of hybrid meetings

To fund additional requirements for RSI meetings member States may wish to consider the adoption of an extrabudgetary project.

Throughout the pandemic, the Executive Secretary has kept the membership apprised of matters related to conference servicing arrangements throughout and has repeatedly encouraged contribution of XB resources to bridge the funding gap. To date, no pledges have been received. As requested by the EXCOM Bureau and based on the available financial data, the secretariat will elaborate a draft XB project to facilitate further consideration of the issue even prior to the identification of donors and formal presentation to EXCOM.

Option F: Informal virtual consultations

If no resources are available to fund RSI meetings and if the in-room option is deemed insufficient due to ongoing constraints caused by the pandemic conditions (e.g. continuing travel constraints), member States could consider to exceptionally revert to informal

virtual consultations to build consensus on business-critical issues.

Member States may wish to consider if they wish to exceptionally authorize this approach, as formal in room meetings have been restored as of January 2022.

- If so decided and depending on the preferred modality, the silence procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic may have to be aligned (incl. reference to special operational context and broadened scope of silence procedure to cover all subsidiaries bodies.)
- To elaborate further details and build consensus for such an approach, informals could be called.

Next steps: At this time, UNECE will implement the Official Calendar of Meetings for the first six months of 2022 as planned in November 2021.

EXCOM may wish to provide the UNECE secretariat guidance on the way forward related to the RSI functionality and related issues.
