

**ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

122nd meeting  
Geneva, 3 May 2022

Item 5

Informal document No. **2022/15**

**Meeting servicing**

**Note by the Secretariat**

Note by the secretariat

*The current note provides updates on recent work undertaken by the UNECE secretariat related to meeting servicing arrangements, both in the context of efforts to ensure business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a standing organizational practice to continuously modernize its working methods to ensure efficient and effective conduct of work.*

*This work is undertaken further to several decisions by member States, including*

- *EXCOM decision of 10 July 2020, taken at its 110<sup>th</sup> meeting, that “requests the UNECE secretariat to present a proposal for an extrabudgetary project on **a review of existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements, including for capacity-building activities, drawing on the lessons from the COVID 19 crisis, to EXCOM for consideration**”.*
- *EXCOM decision of 8 July 2021, taken at its 117<sup>th</sup> meeting, “requests the secretariat to **study the advantages and disadvantages of remote participation at the 69<sup>th</sup> Commission session, including through hybrid meeting formats, the contribution of pre-recorded messages and a webcast functionality.**”*
- *EXCOM decision of 26 January 2022, taken at its 120<sup>th</sup> meeting, that requests the secretariat to continue the **dialogue between UNECE and UNOG on conference servicing matters, including related to the resourcing of remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) as a business continuity measure, and asks the Bureau of EXCOM to engage in this process.**”*
- *Guidelines on procedures and practices for ECE bodies (E/2013/37 E/ECE/1464, para 1): “**It should be ensured, at all administrative levels of the secretariat and for all bodies of the Commission, that the work is carried out in a way that is member driven, participatory, consensus-oriented, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, results-oriented and accountable.**”*

*As meeting servicing modalities are still evolving and planning parameters continue to shift as the pandemic continues, the secretariat wishes to inform on action taken thus far and plans for further review of existing practices and future opportunities. The present note highlights initial lessons and proposes a roadmap on the way forward.*

*The Executive Committee is invited to consider draft decisions to ensure business continuity and facilitate a further consideration of meeting servicing issues.*

## Introduction

1. In 2020 and 2021, the global COVID-19 pandemic impaired the conduct of meetings on site, reduced availability of interpretation, halted/severely limited the travel of participants, and reduced meeting rooms capacity due to sanitary measures (both for interpreters and participants). In response to this *force majeure* situation, UNECE temporarily adjusted its meeting practices to ensure business continuity:

- Exceptionally, special procedures were introduced to allow for the conduct of meetings with remote participation option and facilitate decision-making in formats outside of the standing rules of procedures.
- Virtual and hybrid formats were used when in room meetings were not possible or international travel was restricted.
- Informal meetings (often without interpretation) were convened to build consensus around issues under discussion, and decisions were subsequently formalized through silence procedure.
- Further, a dedicated procedure was established to ensure that connectivity issues would not impair the ability of delegations to participate in the decision-making process: All decisions taken in formal meetings with remote participation underwent a silence procedure to reconfirm decisions taken in the room.
- The Executive Committee was regularly updated on the application of the Special Procedures.
- For the Commission session, remote participation options and the submission of pre-recorded video statements for the high-level segment were introduced.
- As available on-line meeting platforms (Interprefy, Kudos) do not allow for more than 500 participants per room, UNTV was used for meetings of high interest for civil society. This also allowed for the provision of subtitles and strengthened accessibility of the proceedings.

## Key lessons on meeting servicing arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic

2. Based on these temporary ad hoc arrangements, UNECE has collected a wealth of experience on evolving meeting practices, the impact of remote access to meetings, and additional formats that could support the implementation of its Programme of Work in addition to the established arrangements. Key lessons include the below:

- (a) The pandemic affirmed the value of **in person meetings** and face-to-face discussions, especially for political consensus building processes and negotiations which involve the negotiation of legal agreements or their amendments.

- (b) **In person meetings offer a wide spectrum of informal engagement opportunities** (both substantive and social) that are valuable features of current multilateral diplomacy. Those cannot be fully replicated in hybrid or remote formats.
- (c) The intergovernmental machinery at the United Nations is currently geared to the established **3-hour session** formats of formal meetings. A reduction of meeting length to 2 hours, as witnessed during the pandemic for hybrid meetings with interpretation, significantly hampers negotiation processes and impairs the coverage of the full meeting agendas.
- (d) The introduction of **hybrid meetings**, with the option to participate in meetings remotely as well as on site, has proven to be an **important and effective means to ensure business continuity**. To consider the potential of this format for possible future introduction into regular working method, a more detailed assessment of dependencies and supporting requirements should be undertaken.
- (e) The option for remote engagement in both official meetings and side-events has **broadened participation** significantly. Absolute numbers and level of participants have markedly increased. Moreover, there is greater inclusiveness with additional participation from distant locations. This has led to greater visibility of UNECE work and strengthened knowledge sharing with a broader range of stakeholders.
- (f) The introduction of additional meeting formats has also increased **flexibility regarding meeting timing and duration**, compared to the established timeslots usually allocated (10–13 h /15–18 hrs), which creates greater opportunities for more agile meeting planning that can take into account different time zones.
- (g) Remote participation has reduced
  - (i) the **time of experts** needed to join the discussions (no travel time);
  - (ii) the staff time expended on the organization of **travel for participants**, where applicable, and the related travel costs expended; and
  - (iii) the **carbon footprint** associated to participant travel.
- (h) The organization of hybrid meetings has added **complexity to the meeting planning** and preparation. It increased staff time expended on servicing, as in addition to the in room arrangements, preparation for remote access and related technical support have to be made. If hybrid meetings are considered as a more permanent feature, training should be provided to ensure that staff is fully conversant in the technical features of the IT platform and support services for hybrid meetings. Additionally, commensurate staffing needs to be provided to cover the additional support requirements.
- (i) To incrementally resume the conduct of meetings, planning parameters were adjusted repeatedly during the evolving pandemic situation. This has triggered frequent **changes to the official calendar of meetings** and created a **significant additional workload**, as compared to the usual one-off annual planning cycle.

- 
- (j) Ad hoc **prioritization guided the allocation of reduced servicing capacity** in the intergovernmental architecture and ensured that business critical decisions could be made throughout the crisis in all subprogrammes. A further study of these criteria should be undertaken to review their impact on business continuity and programme delivery, to inform future capacity allocation in case of a force majeure situation and possible mitigating measures.
- (k) Through the **special procedures** during the COVID-19 situation, provisional and time-limited adjustments to the meeting modalities were authorized, including decision making via silence procedure (after informal consultation) and temporary suspension of interpretation in the working languages. These arrangements have worked effectively and efficiently to ensure business continuity.
- (l) Different intergovernmental bodies and subsidiaries serviced by the UNECE secretariat, have elaborated **ad hoc modalities** to facilitate **the conduct of hybrid or fully virtual meetings**. Related documents are a valuable resource to inform, as appropriate, an update of relevant procedures and working methods should hybrid modalities be considered as a more regular feature of future meeting servicing arrangements.
- (m) Experiences with hybrid meetings vary depending on the choice of the IT platform used to support remote participation. *(During the crisis, multiple formats, including Interpretfy, Kudos, WebEx, etc, were in use at different Geneva-based entities. UNOG has since consolidated its services and uses the Zoom format.)*
- (i) **Technical support and user guidance** on equipment (microphone/webcam/bandwidth) and online practices are important to enable remote engagement. Testing of the connection and audio/visual connection of participants ahead of meetings are key to ensuring smooth access during the session.
  - (ii) **Technical solutions** for certain intergovernmental processes still need to be developed/ improved for hybrid meetings (e.g. credentials/voting/elections).
  - (iii) **The Use of IT tools for informal exchanges** in the margins of hybrid meetings, often available as part of the existing IT platforms, can be further explored to strengthen the interactive engagement among participants beyond the main plenary (e.g. whiteboards; breakout rooms, chat discussion).
- (n) Participants acknowledged that **hybrid or remote meeting formats** were particularly **well suited for certain types of engagement**, including for example informational sessions, capacity building activities, consultative meetings of Bureaux, and select technical committees, etc. High-level decision-making processes on strategic issues, mandates and resources, while exceptionally enabled through the special procedures during the *force majeure* circumstances, however, were often identified as better suited for in person sessions. It was recommended to study the potential of remote meeting formats further in close consultation with the Bureaux and representatives of the respective bodies to ascertain whether such formats should be integrated in its future working modalities. Such an assessment should include a scoping of the relevant operational context, possible

dependencies and related resource requirements, including a possible reallocation of participant travel funds, as appropriate.

- (o) Due to reduced availability of **interpretation**, not all meetings could be held in the established working languages. Participants reiterated the importance of multilingualism to enable inclusive deliberations. Further, it was noted that for some entities, e.g. those servicing legal instruments, interpretation was indispensable and prescribed in the agreements themselves. At the same time and in light of growing budgetary constraints, a review of interpretation entitlements for different meeting formats/subsidiaries was recommended to ensure the most effective and efficient use of available resources.
- (p) The provision of hybrid meeting support during the pandemic was exceptionally supported and funded as a business continuity measure in 2020 and 2021. UNOG, as UNECE's service provider for meeting servicing, and UN Headquarters have clarified that there is currently **no mandate and no designated resources** to support such services going forward. Entities wishing to add this servicing modality to their meeting servicing arrangements would need to adopt a specific mandate that may trigger a Programme Budget Implication.

## Roadmap on the way ahead

3. Effective and efficient meeting servicing is critical to the smooth functioning of UNECE's complex governance architecture, its role as convening platform, and the delivery on its Programme of Work. As the pandemic has shown, related risks need to be mitigated more actively to ensure business continuity, as needed. Moreover, additional opportunities to modernize related working methods and operational practices for meeting services exist that warrant further exploration. Member States may therefore consider the below roadmap that offers short-, medium- and longer-term actions to safeguard and update UNECE's meeting servicing arrangements.

### I. The hybrid meeting modality as a means to ensure business continuity

4. 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 was able to continue its operations during the pandemic, albeit under a reduced calendar of official meetings and with significantly reduced meeting duration. 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.

5. As reported to the Executive Committee in January 2022 (informal document 2022/3), this arrangement will not continue in 2022 and discussions are underway with United Nations Headquarters on how to cover these additional expenditures, while the business continuity readiness arrangements for meeting servicing remains in effect at UNOG.

6. To mitigate related risks going forward, the exceptional provision of remote conference servicing for UNECE's calendar of Official meetings may be advisable as a contingency measure in 2023.

7. To facilitate further planning, the ECE secretariat has engaged with UN Headquarters to explore the possibility of including a related budget line in the 2023 Regular Budget, subject to the approval of its member States. On 11 April 2022, the Office of the Controller informed that the Secretariat intends to approach the hybrid modality globally and not region by region. Accordingly, an oral statement on a related draft decision entailing programme budget implications would not be issued at this time.

8. UNECE secretariat stands ready to further brief member States on the issue upon receipt of supplementary information from Headquarters.

## **II. Stocktake on UNECE meeting practices and visioning exercise to identify future servicing needs and opportunities**

9. UNECE will engage with its service provider UNOG in the context of the project entitled "Conference servicing today and tomorrow" to review existing UNECE meeting servicing modalities and explore relevant international good practices in the field.

- A stocktake will identify current meeting servicing requirements in different types of subsidiary bodies of UNECE's complex and diverse subsidiary architecture.
- A visioning exercise will identify evolving requirements and opportunities to update existing servicing formats to facilitate effective and efficient meeting support to UNECE's multifaceted convening role in the future. This will, inter alia, include a review of the experiences with hybrid and remote formats and the elaboration of proposals on how modern ITC formats could be incorporated into meeting servicing arrangements.
- The process will also identify prerequisites (including but not limited to procedural and legal issues, technical set up, resource requirements and related mandates) for operationalizing such formats going forward, for further consideration by member States.
- A clear cost structure for respective services will be articulated to inform effective and efficient management of available resources.

The views of member States and other key stakeholders will be solicited to inform this process.

## **III. Pilots to test new formats for different types of subsidiary bodies/activities**

10. Once a "provisional menu" of options for updated meeting servicing modalities has been elaborated, a pilot is proposed to study their utility under operational conditions and explore how they could be integrated into UNECE's meeting servicing arrangements. Two subprogrammes, Environment and Energy, have indicated readiness to contribute to these pilots.

11. In close consultation with the Bureaux of the respective subsidiary bodies, revised servicing modalities could be devised. This may include (provisional) adjustments to procedural guidance, Terms of Reference, mandates etc. to reflect the adjusted servicing entitlements and working methods.

#### **IV. Proposals to scale up arrangements for roll out to wider governance architecture**

12. The findings of the pilots would be reviewed by the respective subsidiary bodies and presented to the Executive Committee, together with recommendations on the way forward. Lessons would inform a proposal on how the new modalities could be scaled across UNECE's governing architecture, as appropriated. It is foreseen that for this larger review process, additional extrabudgetary resources would be required.

13. As the roadmap is further elaborated, more detailed Terms of Reference will be prepared to scope the respective activities. The secretariat will provide periodic updates on the process and its findings, with a view to elaborating related proposals for further considerations by member States.

#### **Next steps:**

#### **The Executive Committee may wish to**

- **take note of the update provided on UNECE meeting servicing issues, as contained in informal document 2022/15. It welcomes the efforts undertaken by the secretariat to strengthen business continuity measures related to the delivery of its calendar of official meetings and knowledge sharing and capacity-building activities and the further review of existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements. EXCOM looks forward to further periodic updates on the activities outlined in the roadmap, and the submission of related proposals for its consideration.**
- **reiterate the importance of availability of meeting services in support of the official ECE calendar of meetings should a *force majeure* situation arise. This would include the exceptional provision of hybrid meeting support services and remote simultaneous interpretation, as needed. In this regard, EXCOM requests the ECE secretariat to continue its dialogue with relevant Secretariat entities at UN Headquarters to advance related contingency planning on the understanding that implementation of business continuity measures would not be funded from Sect.20 of the budget.**

\* \* \*

To brief the membership on the latest developments on meeting servicing arrangements, including on supplementary information foreshadowed by UN Headquarters, **informal consultations will be held on 25 April 2022 at 15:00 in Room XXVII.**