

**Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods
and on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification
and Labelling of Chemicals**

14 November 2023

**Sub-Committee of Experts on the
Transport of Dangerous Goods**

Sixty-third session

Geneva, 27 November- 6 December 2023

Item 15 of the provisional agenda

**Opportunities to enhance operational efficiency
and inclusiveness**

**Sub-Committee of Experts on the Globally Harmonized
System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals**

Forty-fifth session

Geneva, 6-8 December 2023

Item 7 of the provisional agenda

Other business

Hybrid and virtual meetings

Note by the secretariat

Background

1. Following a decision taken at United Nations level as a business continuity measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, the provision of hybrid and online meeting support was exceptionally funded through regular budget in 2020 and 2021. In addition, special procedures were introduced exceptionally to allow for the conduct of hybrid and online meetings and facilitate decision-making in formats outside of the standing rules of procedures.
2. In 2022, the secretariat was informed that as from 2023, these exceptional temporary ad hoc arrangements would be discontinued and no designated resources would be made available for such services going forward.
3. Since the consequent return to in-person meetings, several delegations have expressed interest in exploring the possibility to request some of the sessions of the sub-committees to be held in a hybrid or online format.
4. The question was raised several times during past TDG and GHS sub-committees sessions and it has also been addressed by some delegates during informal bilateral exchanges with the secretariat.
5. At the forty-third session of the GHS Sub-Committee, a member of the secretariat informed delegations that in the absence of a decision at the General Assembly or ECOSOC level to formalize hybrid or online meetings, they were considered informal meetings and therefore remained subject to the limitation of entitlements associated to this status (see ST/SG/AC.10/C.4/86, paragraph 86).
6. Mindful of the interest expressed by delegations on this topic, the secretariat would like to share with the sub-committees the outcome of the discussions held so far at General Assembly level.

Formats of meetings

7. Matters related to conference management and the pattern of conferences are dealt with by the General Assembly, which considers, among others, the information, findings and

recommendations submitted by the Secretary-General, the Committee on Conferences¹, and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ)².

8. The following documents related to conference management (including matters related to hybrid or online meetings) were on the agenda for consideration by the General Assembly at its 78th session (starting on September 2023):

- Report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences in 2022 (document [A/78/96](#)). The report provides detailed information about the complexities of transitioning conference-servicing operations to a virtual environment in paras. 10 to 21 (reproduced in annex I to this document for ease of reference).
- Report of the Committee on Conferences for 2023 (document [A/78/32](#)) which includes the calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations and the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences for 2024.
- The report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (document [A/78/544](#))

9. The secretariat would like to bring the attention of the sub-committees to the information provided in paragraph 5 of the report of the Advisory Committee (reproduced below), with regard to the challenges and areas identified by the Secretary-General as requiring further clarification and guidance from Member States before considering the provision of hybrid and online meetings:

“5. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that, while continuing to provide conference services during the intervening period of the pandemic, at the same time, that period has also highlighted challenges and areas requiring clarification and guidance from Member States. These issues include:

(a) The provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires a mandate from the General Assembly, along with approved legal parameters and technical requirements (see [A/77/7](#), para. 71), which includes the need to clarify how the rules of procedure would be applied in a formal meeting being held in hybrid or virtual format, the requirement of universal access to digital platforms to ensure equal participation by all Member States and the question of authentication of participants;

(b) Existing remote simultaneous interpretation platforms are not fully compliant with the standards set by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and do not fulfil all of the United Nations-specific requirements;

(c) The need to limit the duration of remote simultaneous interpretation to two hours and the number of assignments for interpreters per week to five in order to address potential health hazards, which is contrary to the original workload standard set by the General Assembly, according to which the workload of interpreters had been defined as seven (exceptionally eight) assignments per week of a three-hour duration;

(d) The persistence of many technical problems, such as sound compression, connectivity issues and the use of ill-adapted equipment by remote participants, which continue to have a negative bearing on the quality of sound that is paramount for the interpretation of the proceedings;

(e) The equipment required to provide support to virtual and hybrid meetings was purchased with funding released under exceptional measures taken to ensure business continuity, in March 2020. Should hybrid and virtual meetings be mandated as an established part of the format of the programme of meetings, then operationally there would be human resources, technical and cost implications to the budget submission by multiple departments that comprise the conferencing ecosystem, as

¹ <https://www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/coc>

² <https://www.un.org/ga/acabq/node/114>

on-site, hybrid, and fully virtual meetings with interpretation require different amounts of human resource allocation (A/78/96, paras. 10–21).³”.

10. The documents addressing the pattern of conferences were considered by the Fifth Committee on 27 October 2023. A summary of the outcome of the discussions (for information purposes only, not an official record) was circulated in a press release as part of the General Assembly’s meetings coverage.⁴ The video recording of the session is available at: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1x/k1xbwzejlj>.

Summary

11. In the light of the information provided above, the secretariat would like to invite delegations requesting converting TDG and GHS sub-committees’ official in-person meetings into official hybrid or virtual sessions, to note the following:

- (a) expressions of interest from the sub-committees to convert official in-person sessions into official hybrid or virtual sessions can be noted but do not constitute a mandate enabling the secretariat to formalize and request the necessary resources to organize them;
- (b) the provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires the establishment of a mandate and a framework from the General Assembly, along with the definition and approval of legal parameters and technical requirements, addressing among other aspects:
 - (i) clarification on how the rules of procedure are to be applied in a formal meeting being held in hybrid or virtual format;
 - (ii) compliance of remote simultaneous interpretation platforms with International Organization for Standardization (ISO) compatible audio standards and United Nations-specific requirements;
 - (iii) universal access to digital platforms for all meeting participants to ensure equal participation by all Member States, including the question of authentication of participants;
 - (iv) workload standards for interpreters;
 - (v) additional human resources, technical and cost implications.
- (c) A new mandate would have annual budgetary implications, which would need to be estimated and included in the programme budget proposal for consideration by the General Assembly. Entitlements associated with scheduled meetings would need to be determined and incorporate various meeting modalities.
- (d) The draft resolution on the pattern of conferences for 2024 (see document A/78/32) does not contain provisions allowing for the organization of mandated meetings in remote format in 2024.

12. The secretariat will continue to keep the sub-committees informed of the outcome of the discussions of the General Assembly on this topic.

³ The text of paragraphs 10-21 is reproduced in annex I to this document.

⁴ [Delegates Urge Quality Services, Equal Treatment for Official Languages at All Four UN Headquarters, as Fifth Committee Discusses Pattern of Conferences | UN Press](#)

Annex I

A/78/96

Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the pattern of conferences

Information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2022

[Only the paragraphs dealing with provision of hybrid and online meetings are reproduced below. The full report is publicly available in the six UN official languages: document A/78/96]

“10. On 5 May 2023, the World Health Organization declared an end to the public health emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the intervening period of more than three years, the United Nations Secretariat provided virtual and hybrid meeting modalities for numerous meetings and events to ensure business continuity. This experience has garnered a wealth of lessons learned, foremost among which is the possibility of ensuring business continuity even during times of severe limitations on in-person meetings owing to the need to protect the safety of meeting participants and Secretariat staff.

11. At the same time, the intervening period has also highlighted challenges and areas requiring clarification and guidance from Member States.

12. When United Nations Headquarters and other duty stations closed in March 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the complexities of transitioning conference-servicing operations to a virtual environment soon became evident.

13. The General Assembly, in its resolution 77/262, endorsed the observations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in its first report on the proposed programme budget for 2023 (A/77/7), in which the efforts of the Secretary-General to provide services to Member States and other clients during the pandemic were acknowledged.

14. As noted by the Advisory Committee, the provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires a mandate from the General Assembly, along with approved legal parameters and technical requirements. In this connection, there may be a need to clarify how the rules of procedure would be applied in a formal meeting being held in hybrid or virtual format.

15. A related aspect is the requirement of universal access to the digital platforms to ensure equal participation by all Member States. In this regard, the question of authentication of participants has presented itself. According to the Office of Information and Communications Technology, when supporting Member States' meetings, it ensures that the required testing is conducted in advance, including verification and confirmation of access. This includes the platforms that underpin UniteVC, the United Nations videoconference system, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom and the remote simultaneous interpretation platforms.

16. The virtual and hybrid meeting platforms provided by the Broadcast and Conference Support Section of the Office of Information and Communications Technology feature sophisticated (Advanced Encryption Standard 128-bit) encryption. The Section differentiates between open and closed meetings when selecting platforms to support Member States' meetings. UniteVC is used for both open and closed meetings but cannot be used for remote simultaneous interpretation. All other platforms are to be used only for open meetings.

17. In the wider context of universality of access being understood as access from anywhere by Member States and participants, however, multiple and varied practical, legal and technological challenges have arisen that are outside the scope of the Office's remit.

18. Another challenge has been that none of the existing remote simultaneous interpretation platforms is fully compliant with the standards set by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and fulfils all of the United Nations-specific requirements. After its deployment, the Secretariat had to limit the duration of remote simultaneous interpretation to two hours and the number of assignments for interpreters per week to five in order to address potential health hazards. This, however, is contrary to the original workload standard set by the General Assembly in 1991, according to which the workload of interpreters had been defined as seven (exceptionally eight) assignments per week of a three-hour duration.

19. Regardless of the technology involved or the standards that it meets, appropriate set-up by the remote participants is an essential prerequisite for successful remote servicing of meetings. Despite over three years of experience with remote participation and extensive communication campaigns to meeting participants, many problems persist as sound compression, connectivity issues and the use of ill-adapted equipment by remote participants continue to have a negative bearing on the quality of sound that is paramount for the interpretation of the proceedings. As a result, interpretation has been stopped, on occasion, during meetings owing to poor connectivity and set-up.

20. The equipment required to provide support to virtual and hybrid meetings was purchased with funding released under exceptional measures taken to ensure business continuity, in March 2020. Should hybrid and virtual meetings become an established part of the format of the programme of meetings, then operationally there would be human resources, technical and cost implications to the budget submission by multiple departments that comprise the conferencing ecosystem, as on-site, hybrid and fully virtual meetings with interpretation require different amounts of human resource allocation.

21. The overall possible implications would include different areas and involve the divisions of administration at the duty stations. To ensure resources for hybrid and virtual conferences, they would need to be mandated, and the related budgetary implications would need to be presented in accordance with the established budgetary procedure.”
