



3 December 2020

Dear Chairs of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies,

I am pleased to write to you in advance of the sessions of functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies of the Council scheduled in the first half of 2021 and I would like to recognize the successful efforts you made to ensure business continuity against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020 session of the Council.

In preparation of your sessions in 2021, on behalf of the ECOSOC Bureau, I am pleased to share for your consideration the attached paper entitled “Consideration of implications of COVID-19-related limitations on in-person meetings for sessions of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies during the 2021 session of the Council”. I encourage you to be flexible in organizing your programme of work, taking into account the prevailing conditions. I also kindly request you to keep me informed of particular developments in relation to your Commission or Committee. Likewise, I will keep you informed of relevant decisions or developments in the Council.

I wish you success in your work and thank you for your cooperation during these challenging times.

Munir Akram
President of the Economic and
Social Council

To the Chairs of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies
cc: All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

CONSIDERATION OF IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19-RELATED LIMITATIONS ON IN-PERSON MEETINGS FOR SESSIONS OF ECOSOC SUBSIDIARY BODIES DURING THE 2021 SESSION OF THE COUNCIL

Introduction

Impact on meetings of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies during the 2020 session of the Council

1. The meetings of the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies during the 2020 session of the Council were affected by limitations recommended on meetings within the United Nations premises as precautionary measures aimed at containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. With a view to ensuring business continuity and sustained efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda in the challenging circumstances, the Council adjusted its working arrangements and those of its subsidiary bodies during the 2020 session, including through adoption of the following resolutions and decisions¹:

- Resolution 2020/3 entitled “Revised working arrangements for the 2020 session of the Economic and Social Council and sessions of its subsidiary bodies”
- Resolution 2020/4 entitled “Further revised working arrangements for the 2020 session of the Economic and Social Council and sessions of its subsidiary bodies”
- Decision 2020/205 entitled “Procedure for taking decisions of the Economic and Social Council during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic²”

3. The President of the Council also provided guidance in a number of letters addressed to the Chairs of subsidiary bodies and encouraged the Chairs to keep her updated on developments in their respective bodies. By adjusting in this way,

¹ See [E/2020/99](#).

² Extended until 31 July 2020 and to decisions of ECOSOC’s subsidiary bodies through decisions 2020/206 and 2002/219. The modality was further extended until 31 August 2020 through the adoption of decision 2021/203.

most subsidiary bodies were able to conduct important work and agree on recommendations which were subsequently adopted by the Council in the course of its 2020 session.

Expected impact on meetings of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies during the 2021 session of the Council

4. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated limitations on meetings at UNHQ have continued in the latter part of 2020. It is to be anticipated that limitations will continue in 2021. In that regard, the President and Bureau of ECOSOC encourage the Chairs and Bureaux of subsidiary bodies to find ways to overcome these challenges so as to continue to provide important policy guidance on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic while getting back on track to achieve the SDGs. They request the Chairs and Bureaux to take into account the considerations listed below in planning their sessions, bearing in mind the need to achieve ambitious outcomes while respecting the specificity of each subsidiary body, and to keep the President informed of developments. As necessary, in the light of developments, the Council may consider adopting overarching decisions on organizational and procedural matters.

5. In light of the foreseen limitations, a combination of the following formats could be considered, building on the experiences from the 2020 session of the Council and the Main Committees of the General Assembly at its 75th session: (1) adjusting the programme of work to allow for a limited number of in-person formal meetings, depending on the need for the subsidiary body to provide political guidance in the area under consideration, including but not limited to the issues related to the impacts of COVID-19, (2) convening of virtual (informal) meetings and consultations and (3) proceeding with a portion of the work through correspondence. Chairs and Bureaux of subsidiary bodies may wish to prepare contingencies to deal with an evolving situation.

In-person meetings

6. Depending on limitations on in-person meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings may need to be kept at a minimum. Taking into account the prevailing conditions, it could for example be considered to limit in-person meetings to an opening meeting for adoption of procedural decisions and to hear opening statements and a closing meeting for adoption of negotiated outcomes. Constraints on the availability of conference rooms and services, as well as considerations related to COVID-19 risk assessments and limitations on the number of participants from each Member State delegation and on participants from categories other than Member States, combined with considerations related to the need for the subsidiary body to provide political guidance in their area of expertise, including but not limited to the issues related to the impacts of COVID-19, through the adoption of negotiated outcomes, need to be borne in mind. Physical distancing requirements have significantly reduced the capacity and availability of conference rooms.

7. Meetings for which international travel is expected, including by representatives from capitals, or meetings to be held outside of headquarters should take into account the foreseen continued risks and restrictions of international travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as quarantine requirements of the host country. All in-person meetings must follow the safety and health guidelines/protocols implemented at UN Headquarters, including risk assessments, physical distancing, and other mitigation measures. The relevant secretariat should also establish contact tracing protocols for each meeting.

Informal virtual meetings

8. Informal meetings may be organized on a virtual platform, with remote simultaneous interpretation in accordance with the conference services entitlement of the body. It should be borne in mind that the standard duration for provision of remote simultaneous interpretation for a meeting held on a virtual platform is two hours, rather than three hours as applicable for in-person meetings. The limited capacity for remote simultaneous interpretation and the technical limitations on the number of parallel virtual meetings that could be accommodated simultaneously should also be noted. Meetings should as a rule

be convened during standard meeting times at UNHQ. Ad hoc requests for meetings on a remote interpretation platform to be convened outside of regular hours, on an exceptional basis, should be made in advance and will be subject to the availability of conference services. The user capacity and accessibility limitations of virtual platforms also need to be taken into account. It will be important to continue to ensure participation of stakeholders and representatives of civil society that engage in the work of the various subsidiary bodies. Those who will have an opportunity to intervene may need to be pre-selected in advance in order to take into account capacity limitations within the virtual platform and to ensure that those who access the platform are accredited participants. It is recommended that sufficient time and resources be devoted to “onboarding” and training participants to use the platform and participants should be encouraged to take use of onboarding sessions in order to facilitate smooth proceedings. As there is currently no intergovernmental agreement on the convening of virtual formal meetings, all meetings convened remotely using a virtual platform will be informal meetings. Only in-person meetings may be convened as formal meetings and thus, adopt decisions, given the current legislative provisions. Recent experience gained in involvement of representatives of civil society and other stakeholders in informal virtual meetings may be built upon.

General discussions

9. Available formats for holding general debates/general discussions may be considered, including in-person meetings, delivery of statements by pre-recorded video statements in conjunction with an in-person meeting, remote participation (VTC) in an in-person meeting, submission of written statements for circulation through eStatements or the meeting website, informal virtual meetings, or a combination of the above. The Secretariat resources necessary for supporting different formats should be taken into account when deciding on the appropriate format. As mentioned above, it should be noted that there are technical limitations on the number of parallel meetings on a remote simultaneous interpretation platform at UNHQ for which video playback can be supported.

Panel discussions/roundtables

10. Available formats for holding panel discussions or roundtables may be considered, including in-person meetings, informal virtual meetings, or a combination of the above. The Secretariat resources necessary for supporting different formats should be taken into account when deciding on the appropriate format. It should be noted that there are technical limitations on the number of parallel meetings on a remote simultaneous interpretation platform at UNHQ for which video playback can be supported. As mentioned above, participation in “onboarding” and training sessions will contribute to smooth proceedings.

Informal consultations

11. Bearing in mind anticipated limitations on in-person meetings at UNHQ, the use of virtual platforms for informal consultations on draft proposals/outcome documents may be considered. It may be advisable to begin informal consultations well in advance of a session, bearing in mind the overall calendar of ECOSOC-related meetings³.

12. A subsidiary body should elaborate policy or expert guidance to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda or its other mandated functions, as an integral part of the response to COVID 19. With this objective in mind, it may consider discussing in advance of the session whether the scope or number of negotiated outcomes might be adjusted for the 2021 ECOSOC session to address the COVID-19 related constraints. In this regard, “technical roll overs” or “procedural updates” of draft proposals could be considered, as appropriate, while ensuring that the subsidiary body delivers on its key functions to support sustainable development.

Decision-making

13. In case adoption of decisions at in-person meetings is not possible due to limitations on in-person meetings at UNHQ, the Council may consider adopting a decision to ensure business continuity, taking into account decisions adopted by

³ See [E/2021/INF.4](#)

the General Assembly. In case the situation does not permit in-person meetings of the bodies and should no other means of taking action be available, proposals (which are usually recommended for adoption by ECOSOC) could be considered directly by the Council when the relevant agenda item is considered at the management segment meetings later in the year.

14. In the event a session would need to convene in a fully virtual modality, the approved dates of the session should be observed as far as possible. As necessary, in instances where it would not be possible to conclude the session within the previously approved dates, the subsidiary body's Bureau is strongly encouraged to provide clear guidance on any adjusted conclusion date after consulting the Council Bureau.

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