United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme

**154 th meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives
to the United Nations Environment Programme**
Nairobi, 20 May 2021
Online meeting
14:00 – 17:00 (GMT+3)

Agenda Item 6: Assessment and lessons learned from the online session of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly

This note, entitled "Virtual meetings "short questionnaire" results", serves as one of the supporting documents for agenda item 6, "Assessment and lessons learned from the online session of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly."

The Office of the Secretary of IFAD conducted an informal survey amongst the governing body secretariats of UN agencies and IFIs, to gather valuable feedback from their experience with the virtual modality of governance activities. The purpose of the survey was to take stock of the changes to working methods over the recent months, with the aim of identifying what has improved and what changes could be maintained for governing body meetings even after the pandemic is over.

The present report provides the results emanating from the responses received from 13 secretariats of UN Funds and Programmes, UN Organizations, UN Specialized Agencies, International Financial Institutions and other Agencies and Financial entities. UNEP was among the UN Programmes that provided inputs to the survey. The full survey questionnaire is annexed to this report.

Virtual meetings "short questionnaire" results

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic still persist, and oblige organizations to continue with the virtual modality of their governing bodies and general meetings. While there is a strong perception that when social distancing restrictions are lifted, organizations' natural instinct will be to return to in-person meetings with immediate effect, the Office of the Secretary of IFAD (SEC), has started taking stock of the changes to our working methods over the recent months, with the aim of identifying what has improved and what changes could be maintained even after the pandemic is over.

SEC conducted an informal survey amongst the governing body secretariats of UN agencies and IFIs, to gather valuable feedback from their experience with the virtual modality of governance activities. Out of 46 secretariats[1] of UN Funds and Programmes, UN Organizations, UN Specialized Agencies, International Financial Institutions and other Agencies and Financial entities, responses were received from 13.

The main outcomes and considerations resulting from the survey have been summarized and consolidated as follows:

1.   **Upon lifting of social distancing measures, what changes will your organization consider with regard to convening of governing body meetings (e.g. more or fewer meetings? Return to in person meetings or maintaining some virtual or hybrid sessions?).**
   - No definitive decisions have been made as yet
   - The underlying tendency seems to be a gradual return to in-presence meetings, however there is also a strong appetite to continue applying the virtual modality for many meetings, and possibly replace, in some instances, the in-presence meetings with online conferencing.
   - General consideration that meetings of a consultative and informal nature could be held by virtual means, with some immediate and tangible benefits (reduced costs, increased participation etc) and limited disadvantages, while formal governing body sessions would primarily take place in-person.
   - The possibility of holding additional governing body meetings on top of regular in-presence sessions was neither confirmed nor ruled out as a potential option.
   - Implementation of a hybrid meeting modality - allowing in-presence and virtual attendance – is seen as a likely option given that it leverages the benefits of both "virtual" and "in-presence" meetings.

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[1] UN Human Rights, UNEP, BRS MEA, CITES, ESA, FAO, IAEA, ICAO, ILO, IMO, IOM, ITU, UPU, UN, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNITAR, UNOG, UNOPS, UNWOMEN, UNHCR, WFP, WHO, WIPO, WMO, WTO, OECD, UNFCCC, UNSSC, ADB, AFDB, AIIB, BSTDB, CABEI, CARIBANK, EBRD, ECB, EIB, ESM, IADB, IFAD, IIB, IMF, ISDB, NDB, NIB, WB.

2. Pros and cons of virtual governing body meetings and major considerations concerning the governing body meetings organized in the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

PROs:	CONs
Reduced costs (travel, accommodation, conf. services and logistics) *with significantly lower environmental footprint* due to limited travel;	**No in-person interaction** • No possibility for informal exchanges at the margins of the meeting (also relevant for consensus building); • Lack of networking opportunities and possibility of building interpersonal knowledge and trust among members; • Losing touch with delegations/No chance of physical meeting between Management and Board Reps (sometimes it could be perceived as a drawback in terms of communication); • More scripted/less spontaneous discussions; • Difference in time zones can hinder attendance.
Improved timeliness and flexibility. Shorter and more effective meetings: • Flexibility for organization of unplanned/ad hoc meetings and flexibility in organising the time slots for various items in the meeting; • Shorter meeting agendas; • Bold statements, more efficient interventions, comments made in chat.	**Technical glitches and connectivity problems** • Audio/video issues experienced by participants and organizers; • Challenges with interpretation services in virtual environments.
Increased participation • Additional representatives from capitals, who would not normally travel, able to attend/observe; • Less physical overlap with other meetings; • Simplified preparation and possibility of expanded outreach (especially for large Boards).	Practical challenges relating to formal adoption of decisions, which to **put a decision to a vote** (even if the practice is to adopt decisions by consensus)
It prompted the **development of new technical solutions**, and improved electronic access to documents.	**Additional expense**s of virtual platforms/videoconferencing tools with interpretation;

- Overall and during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents did not note any material increase in the number of meetings and/or in the number of documents put forward for consideration in GB meetings as compared to the previous year.

- While acknowledging some additional challenges due to the lack of physical interaction (also relevant for consensus building around sensitive and divisive topics), respondents confirmed that there had been no material impact on decision-making processes due to the virtual setting of the governing body meetings.
- Feedback from Member State representatives with respect to virtual governing body meetings was generally positive and representatives were appreciative of the efforts made by Secretariats to ensure business continuity of governance activities. Although and in most cases members manifested great adaptability and familiarity with the "new" meeting platforms and videoconferencing tools (zoom), in some cases they underlined the importance of in-person meetings for substantive negotiations and formal decision-making (to be fully supported by interpretation services), though preferring to return to in presence meeting when possible.

Annex: Virtual meetings short questionnaire

1) **<u>In future, when social distancing measures are no longer required, will you consider:</u>**
    a. Immediately returning to all in-presence governing body meetings?
    b. Replacing any of your in-presence governing body meetings with virtual meetings?
    c. Adding virtual governing body meeting(s) to regular in-presence sessions?
    d. Having "hybrid" governing body meeting(s) allowing in-presence and virtual attendance?
2) What is the basis for your consideration:
    a. From your experience, what are the **pros and cons** of virtual governing body meetings? Please indicate any downside (e.g. cancellations, postponements, changes to rules/procedures/timing of provision of documentation/translation/interpretation, etc.) and/or efficiencies (e.g. reduced travel costs, increased attendance, shorter meeting agendas, etc.) resulting from the move to virtual setting.
    b. Has there been an increased number of governing body sessions – formal and/or informal - during this period?
    c. What has been the impact on consensus-building and decision-making processes in particular for approval of strategic/sensitive items put forward for consideration at official governing body sessions?
    d. If you compare the pandemic period with the previous year, overall has there been an equal/greater/lower number of documents put forward for in-session discussion at official governing body sessions?
    e. What has been the feedback from Member State representatives with respect to virtual governing body meetings?
3) Please feel free to make any additional comments you feel relevant.