

BRIEFING NOTE

**ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH HYBRID AND VIRTUAL WORKING METHODS
OF UN SYSTEM INTERGOVERNMENTAL BODIES UNDER COVID-19**

Drawing on the FOGGS Online Brainstorming of 28 July 2020

Participants in the FOGGS online brainstorming of 28 July 2020, held under the Chatham House Rule, included delegates to and secretariat staff from UN system organizations headquartered in New York, Geneva, Nairobi, Rome, Vienna and Washington DC, corresponding CSO representatives, academic experts, and staff members and advisors of FOGGS. Participants identified a number of issues regarding the evolution of hybrid and virtual intergovernmental meetings, and the rules governing negotiations and decision making in these new spaces. The points below draw on the brainstorming discussion without being strictly limited to that, as they have been processed by the FOGGS team. The distinction among procedural, logistical and substantive issues is only an indicative classification, keeping in mind that issues are interconnected and often highly political in the UN system context, even if they appear to be technical at first sight.

Procedural issues

Any new virtual or hybrid system should adequately provide for:

- *Participation of delegates from all member states* represented on any particular body;
- *Participation of all adequately accredited members of any delegation*, some of whom may connect on-line from the capital, some on-line from their mission building or home, and some of whom may be physically in the designated intergovernmental body conference room;
- A new working definition of *a quorum*;
- A procedure to ask for the *suspension of vote or a debate* if a delegation is technically disconnected from a session (possibly using an approach adopted by the IMF that requires that a delegations with a person on-line needs to have a designated backup elsewhere so that voting and meetings can continue);
- Procedures to ensure the *right of reply*, including for pre-recorded statements that are part of the official record;
- Rules governing *points of order* for virtual participants;
- *A supplemental decision-making procedure*, allowing for actual voting, as the silence (consensus) procedure effectively creates a veto for every member state that may lead to stalemate; and transparency regarding the delegation(s) which broke the silence procedure;
- *A process for CSOs to make interventions* in writing, orally, and with pre-recorded videos, as appropriate;
- *The same level of transparency for consultations* on draft resolutions that existed before COVID-19 even if different means are used for the consultations/negotiations;

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- *A procedure to regularize the information exchange via electronic means* enabled by virtual meeting tools, such as using the chat function (i.e. are interventions sent to all participants part of the formal record of the meeting);
- *A procedure to accommodate time zone differences* between UN entity headquarter cities and member state capitals, possibly through rotation of the time zone used for reference.

Logistical issues

Any new virtual or hybrid system should take into account:

- The need to develop a *unified UN-owned and managed videoconferencing platform* to conduct UN system meetings.
 - Such a platform would:
 - *Ensure that all delegations have the technical means and know-how for reliable and secure access to the videoconferencing platform* in spite of potentially different online standards, hardware or software incompatibilities, sanctions or other impediments;
 - *Ensure the unique accreditation and identification of delegates* entitled to represent countries from missions or capitals;
 - *Provide basic security for participants*, including knowing confidently who is speaking and who is listening in to formal sessions;
 - *Prevent the control of the platform by private interests*, the commercialization of data, or the distribution of identifiable data without formal permission unless they refer to publicly available material and open meetings;
 - *Include clear rules on the order of display of virtual participants* when it may be appropriate for the Secretariat service covering the meeting to give visual attention to regional or group spokespersons or to key delegations engaged in a negotiation (so that virtual participants do not need to flip between screens to find key speakers);
 - *Include clear rules for the appropriate recognition of virtual participants* from member state delegations, observers, Secretariat officials, CSOs, media and others.
 - Such a platform could also:
 - *Help ensure that interpretation services are available for all meetings that are entitled to them;*
 - *Provide an easy method for virtual or hybrid side meetings* for regional groups, friends-of-the-chair groups, bilateral consultations and other informal negotiations (such side room spaces would also need high level security for confidential and informal discussions);
 - *Provide for closed captioning* for hearing-impaired participants and as back up for audio failure;
 - *Provide a visual chat feature* to allow for meaningful negotiations and consultations during a meeting;

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- allow all speakers to immediately distribute their statements and supporting documents to all other participants (equivalent to the distribution of documents on the side of a conference room).
- The need for a *secure infrastructure for electronic and/or hybrid voting*.
- The need to *manage the varied technological capabilities of missions and member states, and to ensure access by accredited civil society / major groups too*,
- The need for the *UN calendar and registry of meetings to include related webinars* in addition to any physical side-events.
- The need for *any new system to be user friendly*.
- Secretariat Conference Service staff should have:
 - *Backup telephone numbers for all delegates* participating virtually;
 - *Backup telephone numbers for the chair, the chair's staff, Secretariat substantive staff and interpretation staff* participating virtually;
 - *A designated help line* that can be used by delegations who need technical assistance or advice;
 - *Other business continuity mechanisms* as necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of virtual/hybrid intergovernmental meetings and related activities.

Substantive issues

- Support for the Chair of an intergovernmental body should include:
 - *Access to secretariat substantive department staff* to provide policy advice and manage annotated texts and bracketed texts;
 - *Access to conference service staff* to manage procedural and technical concerns;
 - *Access to own office staff* to help broker consensus;
 - *Notification of technical issues that may arise regarding the participation of delegations*, such as 'dropped' delegations, so that the Chair supported by the Secretariat can judge whether the meeting can continue despite the involuntarily / temporary absence of one or more disconnected delegations.
- Establish a mechanism to ensure the timely sharing of reports, policy and research papers in advance of meetings, also translated as necessary.

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