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**Governance issues and other matters arising from
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the Economic and Social Council and
other United Nations bodies and Conferences**

Impacts of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on the transport subprogramme's work

Note by the secretariat*

I. Background

1. Following the declaration on 16 March 2020 by the Swiss authorities of an “Extraordinary Situation” in Switzerland, due to the increasing number of coronavirus cases in the country, all public and private events, international meetings and other services provided by the United Nations secretariat, including the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), were impacted. While the host government decided on 27 May an extensive easing of measure as of 6 June, the extensive backlog of meetings and existing travel restrictions around the world have been impacting the ability of the secretariat to fully deliver the transport subprogramme's work.

2. Furthermore, in a note dated 19 August 2020, the Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe informed the secretariat that, faced with an unprecedented situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the liquidity crisis and the Strategic Heritage Plan (SHP), UNECE would have to severely limit meeting activities for the remainder of 2020. The key parameters were identified by UNOG Conference Management Services as follows:

- Cancelled/postponed sessions cannot be fully replaced with virtual/hybrid meetings
- Virtual/hybrid events have higher cost due to capacity limitations and complexity associated with new meeting approaches
- Client contributions towards the use of the [hybrid] platform may become necessary, given the liquidity situation
- Reduced two-hour duration of virtual/hybrid meetings with interpretation

* This document was scheduled for publication after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



- Cuts in services will be necessary, starting in September, and are likely to impact the availability of meeting rooms and related services at the Palais des Nations
 - UNOG can accommodate at most one UNECE in-person Regular Budget (RB) event with interpretation per day (one 3-hour meeting in the morning and one in the afternoon). The standard support under normal conditions was 3 RB events with interpretation per day, i.e. three 3-hour meetings in the morning and three in the afternoon.
3. This note summarizes (a) “business continuity” adjustment measures put in place by the secretariat in order to ensure continued delivery on the key mandates entrusted to it, even under pandemic conditions, and (b) the impacts of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on the transport subprogramme’s work.
4. The Committee is **invited to take note** of this information.

II. Adjustment measures

A. Special procedures during the COVID-19 period

5. In response to the virtual halting of all United Nations intergovernmental meetings in Geneva due to the COVID-19 pandemic and with a view to ensuring continuity of service, the Executive Committee (EXCOM) of UNECE adopted on 6 April 2020 the “Special Procedures during the COVID-19 period”. Paragraph 6 of that decision encouraged the subsidiary bodies of UNECE to explore innovative formats to conduct business remotely, including, on an exceptional basis and for business-critical issues, decision-making through written consultations and silence procedure outside the regular sessions of the respective bodies.
6. In this regard, the Bureau of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC), supported by the secretariat, proposed for approval by the Executive Committee specific modalities for ITC subsidiary bodies in line with the modalities approved by the Executive Committee (see Annex I). These modalities covered the convening of informal consultations of ITC subsidiary bodies during the period where the Special Procedures apply, to allow them to discuss matters of crucial importance for the continuity of their work under the exceptional circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. These modalities were approved by EXCOM on 20 May 2020 ([Decision No. 5](#)), and formally adopted at its meeting on 5 October 2020.
7. Furthermore, EXCOM at its meeting on 5 October 2020 adopted special procedures on decision-making for *formal* meetings with remote participation with immediate effect and through at least until December 2020 ([ECE/EX/2020/L.12](#)). These procedures apply to Sectoral Committees, bodies reporting directly to EXCOM, and Working Parties.

B. Cancellation, postponements, informal/remote (virtual) meetings, and combined informal/formal events

8. Due to the extraordinary circumstances outlined above, several planned meetings of UNECE sectoral committees and their subsidiary bodies were rescheduled or cancelled.
9. Furthermore, in response to the above situation, and in full compliance with the EXCOM decision on special procedures for ITC subsidiary bodies, several meetings were held virtually under the special procedures to ensure business continuity.
10. Due to severe additional limitations imposed in August 2020, starting September 2020, several meetings were either shortened, due to the limited time available to them under hybrid status. Moreover, some planned meetings were held as “combined” events, partly held under informal status and partly as formal meetings, as a result of intra-UNECE, cross-divisional negotiations, in order to accommodate as many subprogrammes as possible under

UNOG's restricted service quota of "one UNECE event per day". For a more detailed chronology, see Annex II.

C. Additional/new activities due to COVID-19

11. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation measures, several activities, not originally planned in the subprogramme's programme of work, were initiated or supported by the secretariat, in order to ensure its continued regulatory and policy support to member States and Contracting Parties. For a more developed account of these activities, see ECE/TRANS/2021/4.

III. Impacts on the transport subprogramme's work

12. This section reflects the estimated impact on the transport subprogramme of the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the liquidity crisis.

13. Overall, approximately 35–40 per cent of the quantified deliverables of the 2020 Programme of Work of the Transport subprogramme will not be delivered.¹ This note focuses on the impact on:

(a) meetings of ITC subsidiary bodies, since their convening power is the cornerstone of the regulatory work of the Committee, in performing its role as the UN Platform for Inland Transport;

(b) documentation, which is a critical component in the updating of legal instruments.

A. Impacts on meetings

1. Impacts on meetings of standing bodies (Working Parties)

14. At the time of writing of this note, the combined effects of COVID-19 and liquidity crisis on the planned meetings of several ITC Working Parties are still unfolding but it is safe to conclude that they were severe.

15. When considering combined formal (in-person and hybrid with interpretation) and informal meetings under special procedures (without interpretation), the implementation of planned meetings ranged from 35–100 per cent among the various working parties (see table 1).

Box

Working Party on General Safety Provisions (GRSG)

GRSG is a working party reporting to the World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations, WP.29, which usually holds two sessions (April and October) with total seventeen half-days annually fully serviced with interpretation. Due to COVID-19 pandemic and the financial crisis in 2020 the April session had to be postponed to July 2020 and both sessions were held virtually and without interpretation. As delegations attending GRSG were coming from all continents, Contracting Parties requested the meetings to be organized during early afternoons, CET, thus further restricting the number of half days to eight.

EXCOM considered such virtual meetings without interpretation as informal meetings and any substantive decisions would need to follow special proceedings as laid down by EXCOM Inf. doc. No. 2020/18. These special proceedings request a proposal by the Chair of GRSG on the proceedings for the upcoming session that was requested to be approved by the participating countries via a silence procedure of seventy-two hours prior to the meeting. Once approved the meeting was conducted accordingly. Following the meeting, a list of main decisions had to be circulated to all represented Contracting Parties to be adopted via a ten days silence procedure. EXCOM provisions requested that all

¹ Information correct at the time of preparation of this table; subject to further changes due to the fluid situation.

documentation used for silence procedures needed to be made available in the three official languages. Translation of such documents were not covered by the 2020 budget and thus the section's staff needed to prepare them. Finally these meetings were not counted in statistics of meetings presented to EXCOM.

16. Overall, the subprogramme as a whole is expected to implement approximately 62 per cent of planned meetings (see table 1, column (f)).

17. A key component however for the successful discharge of the responsibilities of the Committee and its subsidiary bodies is multilingualism and the ability to run meetings with full interpretation. When examined from this qualitative aspect, for some working parties, especially those that were scheduled to take place in the early stages of COVID-19 responses, the loss of interpretation reached 100 per cent (see table 1, column (e)). For an indicative in-depth discussion of issues faced by the Committee's subsidiary bodies, see also the Box.

18. Overall, only approximately 34 per cent of planned/budgeted meetings of the subprogramme as a whole are expected to be implemented in 2020 with full interpretation, either under physical/in-person or hybrid formats.

Table 1

Impacts of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on meetings of Working Parties

	<i>2020 actual (est.)</i>					
	<i>2020 planned (a)</i>	<i>Implemented With interpretation (b)*</i>	<i>Implemented Without interpretation (c)*</i>	<i>Total implemented in 2020 (d)=(b)+(c)</i>	<i>Implementation with interpretation (e)=(b)/(a) (%)</i>	<i>Implementation with and without interpretation (f)=(d)/(a) (%)</i>
A2.						
Substantive services for meetings (number of three-hour meetings eq.)	369	124	106	230	34%	62%
ITC	327	116	95	211	35%	65%
Inland Transport Committee and Bureau	16	8	7	15	50%	94%
World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations	111	34	40	74	31%	67%
Working Party on the Transport of Perishable Foodstuffs	8	3	5	8	38%	100%
Working Party on the Transport of Dangerous Goods	58	19	13	32	33%	55%
Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics	32	5	7	12	16%	38%

	2020 actual (est.)			Total implemented in 2020 (d)=(b)+(c)	Implementation interpretation with (e)=(b)/(a) (%)	Implementation interpretation with and without (f)=(d)/(a) (%)
	2020 planned (a)	Implemented With interpretation (b)*	Implemented Without interpretation (c)*			
Working Party on Transport Statistics	6	0	4	4	0%	67%
Working Party on Road Transport	6	6	0	6	100%	100%
Global Forum for Road Traffic Safety	14	14	0	14	100%	100%
Working Party on Rail Transport	6	4	2	6	67%	100%
Working Party on Intermodal Transport and Logistics	6	2	4	6	33%	100%
Working Party on Inland Water Transport	18	8	9	17	44%	94%
Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport	46	13	4	17	28%	37%
ECOSOC	40	8	9	17	20%	43%
ECOSOC Committee of Experts on TDG and on GHS	1	1	0	1	100%	100%
ECOSOC Subcommittee of Experts on TDG	29	5	7	12	17%	41%
ECOSOC Subcommittee of Experts on GHS	10	2	2	4	20%	40%
THE PEP	2	0	2	2	0%	100%
High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment	2	0	2	2	0%	100%

* Best annual estimates as of 22 December 2020

2. Impacts on meetings of Teams of Specialists (Groups of Experts)

19. The impacts of COVID-19 on the work of Groups of Experts are treated separately in this document, due to the finite mandates of these bodies. Table 2 summarizes the known

impacts on their planned meetings in 2020. According to table 2, less than 30 per cent of meetings planned under the workplans of the Groups of Experts were implemented.

Table 2

Impacts of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on meetings of Groups of Experts

<i>Group of Experts meetings</i>	<i>2020 planned (a)</i>	<i>2020 actual (b)</i>	<i>Difference (c)=(b)-(a)</i>	<i>Per cent implemented</i>
Group of Experts on assessment of climate change impacts and adaptation for inland transport (WP.5/GE.3)	8	4	-4	50%
Group of Experts towards Unified Railway Law (SC.2/GEURL) (expires in 2020)	12	3	-9	25%
Group of Experts on Benchmarking of Transport Infrastructure Construction Costs (WP.5/GE.4)	4	0	-4	0%
Group of Experts on Road Signs and Signals (expires in 2020)	2	0	-2	0%
Group of Experts on AETR	3	2	-1	67%
Group of Experts on the Permanent Identification of Railway Rolling Stock	12	3	-9	25%
Total	41	12	-29	29%

B. Impacts on documents

20. At the time of writing of this note, the combined effects of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on the delivery of documents is expected to be critical for intergovernmental bodies whose mission is to update and develop legally binding instruments that make inland transport systems worldwide safer, more efficient and more environmentally friendly.

21. In particular, due to the severe restrictions in the organization of meetings under the programme of work of the Committee, with only about 62 per cent of planned meetings implemented in 2020 and only 34 per cent of total with interpretation services. Furthermore, the continued vacancy of a P4 position due to liquidity constraints has further impaired delivery of documentation in one of the highest impact regulatory areas of the subprogramme, vehicle regulations.

22. These combined dynamics **slowed the normative functions** of the Inland Transport Committee, its subsidiary bodies and the transport subprogramme as a whole, who are **expected to issue only about 62 per cent of planned documentation** required for the updating of legal instruments, and often had to delay decision-making that has been postponed to 2021 (see table 3).

Table 3

Impacts of COVID-19 and the liquidity crisis on transport subprogramme documents

	<i>2020 planned (a)</i>	<i>2020 actual (est.) (b)</i>	<i>Implementation (c)=(b)/(a) (%)</i>
A1. Parliamentary documentation (number of documents)	1660	1015	61%
ITC	1331	882	66%
Inland Transport Committee and Bureau	31	31	100%
World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations	840	501	60%
Working Party on the Transport of Perishable Foodstuffs	33	28	85%

	<i>2020 planned (a)</i>	<i>2020 actual (est.) (b)</i>	<i>Implementation (c)=(b)/(a) (%)</i>
Working Party on the Transport of Dangerous Goods	214	146	68%
Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics	32	20	63%
Working Party on Transport Statistics	14	14	100%
Working Party on Road Transport	10	11	110%
Global Forum for Road Traffic Safety	16	16	100%
Working Party on Rail Transport	12	9	75%
Working Party on Intermodal Transport and Logistics	11	12	109%
Working Party on Inland Water Transport	47	60	128%
Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport	71	34	48%
ECOSOC	324	128	40%
ECOSOC Committee of Experts on TDG and on GHS	5	2	40%
ECOSOC Subcommittee of Experts on TDG	257	98	38%
ECOSOC Subcommittee of Experts on GHS	62	28	45%
THE PEP	5	5	100%
High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment	5	5	100%

* Best annual estimates as of 22 December 2020

Annex I

Special procedures during the COVID-19 period

Arrangements for the UNECE Inland Transport Committee subsidiary bodies to conduct business remotely during the COVID-19 period

(EXCOM Informal document No. 2020/18, adopted on 20 May 2020)

Further to the Special Procedures during the COVID-19 period adopted by the Executive Committee of the UNECE on 6 April 2020, the Executive Committee:

1. Takes note that the Bureau of the UNECE Inland Transport Committee (ITC) has decided to approve, where Chairs of ITC subsidiary bodies deem it necessary, the convening of informal consultations of ITC subsidiary bodies during the period where the Special Procedures apply, to allow them to discuss matters of crucial importance for the continuity of their work under the exceptional circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. Authorizes the Chairs of the relevant subsidiary bodies to circulate recommendations on decisions to the members of those subsidiary bodies on business-critical issues resulting from these informal consultations, through the Permanent Missions in Geneva, under a silence procedure of at least 72 hours and in accordance with Rule 44 of the Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure of UNECE as contained in E/ECE/778/Rev.5;
3. Notes that, if the silence is not broken, the recommendations shall be considered adopted and will be submitted to the 83rd session of ITC for consideration, as appropriate.

Annex II

Phases of “force majeure” adjustments to the 2020 Programme of Work of the Transport Subprogramme

Phase I (March – June 2020)

1. Following the declaration on 16 March 2020 by the Swiss authorities of an “Extraordinary Situation” in Switzerland, due to the increasing number of coronavirus cases in the country, all public and private events, international meetings and other services provided by the United Nations secretariat, including UNECE, were banned. While the host government decided on 27 May an extensive easing of measure as of 6 June, the extensive backlog of meetings and existing travel restrictions around the world were followed by the decision of UNOG Conference services not to allow the organization of meetings by UNECE during this period.

Phase II (July – August 2020)

2. Despite the uplifting of the “Extraordinary Situation” in Switzerland, effective as of 6 June, the extensive backlog of meetings and existing travel restrictions around the world have been impacting the ability of UNOG Conference Management Services and, by extension, the UNECE secretariat to fully deliver the transport subprogramme’s work. Following the adoption by EXCOM of decisions related to silence procedures of ITC bodies, some meetings were organized under this arrangement, or as limited hybrid meetings with considerable negative impacts, including: shortening of meetings/agendas; adoption of only business critical decisions; limiting the global outreach of key meetings, even virtual, because of the combined effect of overlapping travel limitations and time differences under virtual or hybrid meetings arrangements; serious delays in the updating of legal instruments; dramatic decrease of deliberations among Member States due to meeting limitations; dramatic decrease of documents prepared and submitted by Member States, due to dramatic decreases of meeting and/or services supporting meetings.

Phase III (August – December 2020)

3. In response to the COVID-mitigation measures; the liquidity crisis and the SHP constraints, the Conference Management Services of the United Nations Office in Geneva can only provide a significantly reduced service quota for UNECE meetings (from 3 meetings per day to 1 meeting per day and 3 hours per session to 2 hours per session for any hybrid meeting) resulting in further cancellations, postponements, shortening and downgrading to informal status of meetings. At the programmatic level, following the extension by EXCOM of decisions related to silence procedures of UNECE sectoral committees, including ITC bodies, some meetings continued to be organized under this arrangement, or as limited hybrid meetings with considerable negative impacts, including: shortening of meetings/agendas; adoption of only business critical decisions for the operations of the bodies (budgets etc); limiting the global outreach of key meetings, even virtual, because of the combined effect of overlapping travel limitations and time differences under virtual or hybrid meetings arrangements; serious delays in the updating of legal instruments; dramatic decrease of deliberations among Member States due to meeting limitations; dramatic decrease of documents prepared and submitted by Member States, due to dramatic decreases of meeting and/or services supporting meetings. The silence procedure itself does not allow for in-session documents and the list of decisions has to be translated in three languages internally/informally by the secretariat, which is both burdensome and not an area of professional competence for the secretariat.