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Integration and coordination of efforts by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and by Member States in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice: other activities in support of the work of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in particular activities of the United Nations crime prevention and criminal justice programme network, non-governmental organizations and other bodies

Conference room paper submitted by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations (Vienna)**

The attached conference room paper has been submitted by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations (Vienna) for consideration by the Commission under agenda item 6 (e) at its thirty-first session

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Staying Connected:  
The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on United Nations Crime Programme meetings

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant change in the way the United Nations Crime Programme works. In-person meetings have been largely replaced by online meetings, or have become hybrid meetings, with both in-person and online participants. After the pandemic has abated, online and hybrid meetings shall presumably become a permanent feature of the United Nations Crime Programme. They provide considerable savings in time and travel, and allow more people to participate. To an increasing extent, connections in the United Nations Crime Programme are being made online.

This conference room paper examines the benefits and drawbacks of the different types of meetings.

United Nations Crime Programme meetings fulfil a number of functions. A different mix of in-person, online and hybrid meetings is called for in different contexts. Online and hybrid meetings are particularly useful for example in fact-finding, technical assistance and in follow-up training. Negotiation, in turn, is best taken care of face-to-face, with in-person meetings. Similarly, often the initial training sessions are most productive when conducted in person. An important function of any meetings – including United Nations Crime Programme meetings – is informal networking. Also this tends to be most successful and rewarding when done in-person.

The pandemic offers an opportunity to reassess how the virtual environment can be better harnessed to make United Nations Crime Programme meetings more representative, and bring in more expertise as well as a broader range of stakeholder views and concerns. Also individual delegations should consider how to find the right balance of expertise, using the possibility of hybrid meetings to expand their delegation to include experts and stakeholders who can contribute online on different agenda items.

This will undoubtedly mean that there will be more information for various meetings to process. However, a more inclusive and thorough exchange of views and experiences can lead to more productive meetings, a better outcome, and ultimately, a United Nations Crime Programme that better serves member states in improving crime prevention and reforming their criminal justice systems to be more effective, fair and humane.

1 Written by Dr. Matti Joutsen.
2 I am grateful to Professor Rosemary Barberet, Director Taro Morinaga and Professor Yvon Dandurand for their perceptive comments on early drafts of this paper.
The past two years have seen an unprecedented change in the United Nations Crime Programme. Since its beginnings over seventy years ago, those working within its framework have always relied on direct personal contacts and negotiations. Now, and at least for the time being, contacts have shifted online, through the use of video technology. This paper looks at what this shift may mean for those contacts, and for the future of United Nations Crime Programme meetings.

Video technology is not in itself new. It was first introduced by ITT at the World’s Fair in New York in 1964. Its use slowly spread in the business world and in the military. The introduction of Video over Internet Protocol (Video over IP; 1976) and Packet Video Protocol (1981) brought down the cost of video meetings, which widened its use for example in government and in education.

Those first applications, however, required an investment in the basic hardware. It was not until CU-SeeMe was developed for the Macintosh in 1993 (with a Windows platform introduced one year later) that it became technically and economically possible for ordinary computer users to make video calls. Beginning only a decade later, social media applications such as Skype (2003), WhatsApp Messenger (2009), FaceTime (2010), Zoom (2011), Signal (2014), Google Duo (2016) and Microsoft Teams (2017) have made it possible to see and talk with family members, friends and colleagues anywhere in the world at the click of a button.

Online meetings - video conferences – became popular. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Governments responded by effectively shutting down most travel and ordering massive lock-downs. This pushed governments, companies, organizations, academic institutions and individuals to go online. The choice between in-person and online meetings was made for them. This was also true of the United Nations. United Nations staff members at the New York, Geneva and Vienna Headquarters were ordered to telecommute as of 16 March 2020. The United Nations buildings became largely deserted, and the holding of in-person United Nations meetings – for many the lifeblood of international relations – was cancelled for the time being. United Nations staff members, diplomats and experts learned a new concept: virtual meetings (online meetings).

For many, going virtual was a frustrating learning experience. They had to obtain new equipment, familiarize themselves with a new technology and adapt to a quite different way of organising, conducting and participating in meetings. For others, the shift online was welcome, since they relished for example the time, trouble and expense saved by not having to travel, or even to leave home or the office.

We are now two years into the pandemic. Despite the increasing number of persons who have been vaccinated, and the hesitant return of national and international travel, the appearance of new variants suggests that many companies and organizations will continue to rely on online meetings. Even when the pandemic has passed, many are predicting that online meetings will remain in much wider use than before, and relatively fewer in-person meetings will be held. At the very least, more meetings will

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3 In brief, the United Nations Crime Programme refers to the work carried out by the United Nations in crime prevention and criminal justice. The main actors are the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the network of United Nations Crime Programme institutes, under the coordination of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

4 Pandemic-era restrictions on the number of persons who could attend a meeting in person have led to other formats for United Nations Crime Programme meetings. In "podium-only meetings," the chairperson and the Secretariat are in the room, and all other participants attend online.

For the 2020 session of the United Nations Crime Commission, which was postponed from the spring to the end of the year, one delegate from each of the 40 Member States of the Commission could attend in person, while others participated online.

For the 2021 session of the United Nations Crime Commission, all delegations could attend the plenary and the Committee of the Whole, but in-person participation was limited to one person per delegation.
become **hybrid**, with some participants on-site, and others tuning in from around the world.

**United Nations Crime Programme meetings and the participants**

United Nations Crime Programme meetings take many forms, ranging from small expert meetings and training sessions, to the mammoth United Nations Crime Congresses, which bring together thousands of participants.

Over the years, the meeting calendar in Vienna organized by the UNODC has become crowded. Until the 1980s, the then United Nations Committee on Crime Prevention and Control generally met for two weeks every second year, and the United Nations Crime Congress was held every fifth year. When the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice was established in 1991, it started holding annual sessions each spring, and then added annual “reconvened” sessions towards the end of the year. When the two United Nations crime conventions entered into force twenty years ago, review of their implementation came to involve several meetings each year, in different formats. The mechanism for the review of implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption, in particular, involves a heavy programme of “in-country visits” in the majority of the 140 states parties to the Convention.

A large number of other meetings are also held in Vienna, such as briefings and “Fingov” meetings.\(^5\)

Beyond United Nations headquarters in Vienna, the UNODC has an extensive network of regional and national offices. The various technical assistance programmes organized through these offices involve many advisory missions each year, as well as planning, research and training meetings.

In addition, the seventeen institutes and entities that cooperate with the UNODC within the framework of the United Nations Crime Programme Network tend to have very active research and training programmes, with a large number of expert meetings and training events throughout the year. To take just one example, by the end of 2021 the regional institute for Asia and the Far East, UNAFEI, has organized a total of 175 several weeks long international courses and seminars, in addition to dozens of bilateral and regional seminars, many public lectures, and a large number of training courses.

Individual United Nations Crime Programme meetings can have **different functions** (for example, fact finding, exchange of information, informal consultations on different options for proceeding, review of research results, preparation of early draft documents, negotiation of texts for adoption, planning and provision of technical assistance, and training). The same meeting (such as sessions of the United Nations Crime Commission, and the United Nations Crime Congresses) can have long agendas that involve several functions.

The **participants** at United Nations Crime Programme meetings generally fall into five categories: members of governmental delegations, representatives of specialized United Nations agencies (including institutes in the United Nations Crime Programme Network), representatives of intergovernmental organizations, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and individual experts. During recent years, also representatives of the private sector have been brought in for discussions on such specific issues as economic crime and cybercrime, as well as the use of technology in crime prevention and in criminal justice. Different types of United Nations Crime Programme meetings will have different constellations of participants, often acting in different roles.

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5 A Fingov meeting is a meeting of the Standing open-ended intergovernmental working group on improving the governance and financial situation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The working group was established in 2009. It meets several times a year, generally for a few hours or at most a day.
While the UNODC, in organizing for example sessions of the United Nations Crime Commission as well as meetings related to the two United Nations crime conventions, follows the respective rules of procedure in inviting national delegations, IGOs and NGOs, the rules of procedure do not apply to expert meetings. The UNODC, acting in accordance with mandates given it by the United Nations Crime Commission, is relatively free to identify the best experts to discuss the subject at hand.

The institutes in the United Nations Crime Programme Network, in turn, have extensive flexibility in deciding on the participants in their meetings and training activities. The decision will be based on the purpose of the meeting or activity. Institutes may contract with a government on training and technical assistance, in which case the government (or individual government agency) will generally select the participants. Similarly, training may be organized for the private sector or various civil society organizations, and again the target company or organization will generally identify who takes part. Otherwise, the institutes tend to select the participants individually.

Benefits of online meetings

Savings in travel time and expense

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, resources were scarce, and governments as well as organizations were looking for various ways to cut costs. Sending participants to meetings was and is a major expense item.

The obvious benefit of moving a meeting online is that it is possible to connect with people from all parts of the world with the click of a button. The participants no longer need to travel across town, across the country or around the world to reach the venue of the meeting. Access can be as close as the nearest desktop or laptop computer. Some United Nations Crime Programme meetings last only a day or two, which means that in the case of in-person meetings, participants from the other side of the world would have to spend more time travelling than in the actual meeting itself.

The costs of travel to meetings can be calculated in different ways, such as loss in time, opportunity cost, financial expense (travel, lodging and per diem), and the carbon footprint impact on the environment. In addition, attending an online meeting also allows participants the possibility of continuing their other work at their office (or home). Where expense is a factor – and it usually is – there will undoubtedly be pressure on governments and organizations to prefer online meetings. It can be expected that, even after the pandemic, this pressure will remain. Once travel budgets have been cut (ostensibly as a temporary measure), it will in practice be very difficult to restore those cut funds back into the budget in full once the travel restrictions are lifted.

Easier to organize ad hoc informal meetings and consultations

The UNODC and the PNI have been able to consult informally with stakeholders by telephone, post and electronic media. The possibility of organizing ad hoc informal meetings and consultations among several stakeholders at one time provides a significant and low-cost opportunity for getting early input from a wide range and number of stakeholders. This is important for example in fact-finding, the exchange of information, and the preparation of early drafts of different documents.

Potential expansion of the number and range of participants

Participation at in-person meetings is limited by a variety of constraints, such as the size of the meeting room, and the difficulty and expense of travelling to the meeting venue. Going online – in particular by webcasting United Nations Crime Programme

6 Opportunity costs in this connection refers to the work or other activity that remains undone due to the need to travel and participate in a meeting.
meetings – can in theory mean that anyone with an online connection can follow the discussions, thus leading to increased transparency.

With United Nations Crime Programme meetings, transparency is in itself a virtue, but it is not the only consideration in deciding on who can participate, and in what role. Other considerations include representativeness, expertise and efficiency. When compared with in-person meetings, online meetings can be more representative and bring in a wider range of expertise, but both can come with some cost to meeting efficiency.

**Representativeness.** Issues related to crime prevention and criminal justice have a large number of stakeholders, as shown by the range of participants involved in United Nations Crime Programme meetings. The UNODC and the institutes in the United Nations Crime Programme Networks will generally seek to make their meetings as representative as possible, in an effort to ensure that the main issues and concerns can be reflected in the discussions. In respect of member states, the UNODC and the institutes will also often seek to ensure (even when not specifically mandated to do so) that there is equitable geographical representation.

**Expertise.** Broadly speaking, up until the early 1990s, most of the participants at United Nations Crime Programme meetings held at United Nations headquarters had a background in crime prevention and criminal justice. They tended to be policy-makers, practitioners or academics. Some participants combined two or all three of these backgrounds. As experts in their respective field, they were able to place the discussions in context, and understand the impact that any decisions would have on criminal policy and practice.

As noted above, following the establishment of the United Nations Crime Commission in 1991, and especially with the review of the implementation of the two United Nations crime conventions, the meeting calendar in Vienna has become crowded. It was no longer financially viable to send participants “from the capitals” to meeting after meeting. As a result, governments have to a large extent shifted the responsibility of attending these meetings to the staff at their diplomatic missions in Vienna, acting where needed on instructions from the substantive experts at home. For example, at sessions of the United Nations Crime Commission and at Fingov meetings, the delegation of most member states consists almost solely of diplomatic representatives.7

Organizing online or hybrid meetings can allow the substantive experts “in the capitals” to follow the negotiations directly, and provide input to the meeting or to their colleagues on site when needed. Indeed, the UNODC has noted that United Nations Commission meetings held in an online or hybrid format have shown in increase in the number of experts and other stakeholders participating from around the world.8

This expansion in participation can bring in a broader range of participants. For example, senior officials and political leaders may not be able to clear their busy calendars to such an extent that they can travel to, and attend, long United Nations Crime Programme meetings in person. However, they may be able to set aside the hour or two required for appearing on a video screen.

Many other potential participants, in turn, cannot afford the financial cost of in-person participation. However, it is often possible for them to go online so that they can

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7 Over time, diplomatic representatives in Vienna who deal with United Nations Crime Programme matters develop their own expertise. In addition, as diplomats, they tend to be better skilled than substantive experts on the negotiation of texts, and to have a better grasp of how the work being carried out fits in with the overall United Nations Organization context. On the other hand, diplomatic representatives are often rotated by their Government to other postings, for example at three or four-year intervals.

follow, and where possible contribute to, discussions that concern them and those that they represent, thus giving United Nations Crime Programme meetings a wider input from stakeholders. Furthermore, this democratization means that meetings can in theory benefit where appropriate from direct input from, for example, front-line police officers and immigration officials, victims of crime, judges, prosecutors, correctional officers and prisoners, civil society representatives, academics, researchers and students. When combined with the use of virtual-reality technology, participants at meetings can in this way obtain a better understanding of the reality of crime prevention and criminal justice work around the world. (However, the digital divide between those who have ready access to computers and the Internet - and are able to use them - may prevent for example representatives of NGOs, especially in the Global South, from participating online.)

**Efficiency.** Different meetings have different purposes. Some may be intended, for example, for the exchange of information; others are for the drafting of documents, and yet others for the adoption of decisions. The more participants there are, the less speaking time each can have. While a discussion on, for example, improved correctional practice could undoubtedly benefit from wide input from a range of stakeholders from correctional officers to civil society representatives, from policymakers to academics, and from victims to prisoners, some restrictions must be made on who can be allowed to participate and to speak, and for how long.

**Maintaining relationships**

United Nations Crime Programme meetings bring together many different persons in many different contexts. Some have the time and opportunity to attend many meetings in person, and can deepen their relationships with their colleagues from around the world. Others, however, have to be much more selective in what meetings they attend, because of the expense and lack of time. The possibility of attending a meeting online allows them to reconnect with colleagues, and thus maintain important relationships despite being on the other side of the world.

**The chairperson has better control of the meeting**

Depending on the exuberance or passion of the participants at in-person meetings, speakers may try to monopolize the floor by not yielding, or will try to speak over one another, making it more difficult for all interested sides to be heard, and to seek an informed compromise. With online meetings, the chairperson can more easily break in on an intervention to request that the speaker yield, and if all else fails, cut off the speaker’s microphone. Only one person’s microphone will be on at a time, ensuring that the focus is on him or her.

To the extent that the online meeting is recorded, or a transcript is generated, this will also simplify the writing of a report on the meeting.

**Possibility of reimagining the meeting format**

With regular in-person meetings, participants show up for the duration of the meeting, attend the sessions which they have largely selected in advance, and then return home. There is not much possibilities for the organizers to try to shuffle the participants among the sessions based for example on their professional background, specific interests, nationality and so on. Even suggesting this on-site would be difficult, given the need to contact all of the participants, allocate rooms, inform the participants of their room assignments, and change up the meeting structure.

With an online meeting, however, the technology allows this to be done more readily. The organizers could, for example, arrange it so that all persons in a specific geographical region or with a certain professional background interested in topic A meet at a certain time, and then perhaps reconvene a week or two later to follow up on the discussions. The same participants could then be dispersed to meet up in different constellations, on different topics, just a few hours or perhaps even several days or weeks later.
This greater flexibility allowed by online meetings may require that the participants prepare better in advance for the meeting than would be the case for in-person meetings, but this can be seen as a benefit: the participants would tend to be more prepared to participate as fully as possible in the meeting.

The organizers of United Nations Crime Programme meetings can, furthermore, take advantage of the possibility of taking instant polls of the opinions of participants on specific issues (of course, in line with United Nations practice, only when this is appropriate and agreed by the participants). Such polling can be done with relative ease, and participants can see how widely specific concerns are shared.

Also from the point of view of the participants, online and in particular hybrid meetings can and should lead to a reconsideration of what “participation” in a meeting means. This is especially the case with larger delegations attending the major United Nations Crime Programme meetings, such as sessions of the United Nations Crime Commission, meetings related to implementation of the two United Nations crime conventions, and the United Nations Crime Congresses. The composition of the delegation has reflected the assessment of the member state or of the organization in question of the relevance of the various items on the agenda. Quite often, some members of the delegation would be responsible for only specific agenda items, or only certain discussions. Once these had been dealt with, that member of the delegation might have no more meeting responsibilities.

With online and hybrid meetings, the delegation could be composed of core members attending in person, and a number of technical and other experts who would attend, online, those discussions that would be of particular relevance to them. Even member states or other organizations that would normally send only a small delegation to a meeting could expand their online involvement, thus enriching the discussions.

**Drawbacks of online meetings**

*Less smooth interaction, with less productivity*

Perhaps the main drawback of online meetings is that they do not allow smooth interaction among all the participants in the same way as do in-person meetings. In an in-person meeting, two or more participants may contact one another while the meeting is in progress, in order to plan strategy or to work out compromises that would take the meeting forward. This can of course be done also online, through breakout meetings or the chat function. However, organizing breakout meetings online is more cumbersome and less spontaneous. The chat function in online meetings, in turn, does allow for direct discussions between individual participants, but this is generally not secure, and participants may not want their private conversations shared more widely.9

The less smooth interaction would be a particular problem in those United Nations Crime Programme meetings that involve negotiation of wording and the seeking of informal consensus before matters are decided formally.

*Additional administrative costs to the meeting organizers*

The shift in the United Nations Crime Programme from in-person to online meetings was made very speedily during early 2020, and only a very few meetings had to be postponed or cancelled entirely. However, the shift did require labour-intensive preparations by the UNODC Secretariat as well as financial resources. During the transition stage, a guide for participants on online meetings was prepared, and the online meeting format that the UNODC would use was tested. A registration system

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9 During the course of an online meeting, participants may be in separate contact with one another for example through social media. However, it is more cumbersome to text messages then it is to speak face-to-face. In addition, texting one another does not convey the same nuances that direct in-person contact does.
had to be set up, and an online interpretation platform had to be developed.\textsuperscript{10} When preparing for individual meetings, the online participants have to be registered, depending on their role (speaker, observer, online). During the meeting itself, the UNODC may need to help participants who are having technical difficulties.\textsuperscript{11}

For the professional United Nations interpreters, who ensure that interpretation is provided in all six working languages (when this is required for the meeting), online meetings are not particularly any more difficult than in-person meetings, with one notable exception. If the interpreters are in a completely different time zone, they may have to work through the night, which can add to their stress and ability to focus. Furthermore, working on-site with direct access to the UNODC Secretariat (and possibly with some of the speakers), increases the possibility that interpreters can, should they wish, secure additional information, and even contact someone who has requested the floor later in the day, to ask about some key words or phrases. The meeting documentation is also more readily available to the interpreters. Having this documentation, as well as different drafts of working documents immediately and physically in front of the interpreter (as opposed to having to call it up online) can be a significant aid in understanding and interpreting statements, and for example to ensure that proposals to amend working documents are interpreted as accurately as possible.

\textit{Technical difficulties}

A commonly cited drawback of online meetings is that the technology is still so new to many participants that they are not always able to get their microphone or camera to work at the right time. Even with “veteran” participants, technical difficulties may lead to a signal being dropped, or to a microphone giving so much feedback that the audio is impossible to understand.

The prevalence of such technical difficulties shall presumably decrease significantly as the technology continues to become more user-friendly, and the participants in online meetings become more comfortable in using the technology.

\textit{Stiffer flow of meetings}

As noted above, at online meetings the chairperson has more control over who can take the floor. However, this technically enhanced control of the speaker’s list also has a downside. Online meetings can be stiffer than in-person meetings, with a less smooth transition from one speaker to the next, and with less spontaneity. When the chairperson gives the floor to the next speaker, there may be a lag before that speaker succeeds in turning on his or her microphone. This of course also happens with in-person meetings where the participants use microphones (as is common with United Nations Crime Programme meetings), but to a lesser extent.

Online meetings also do not allow readily for the rapid spontaneous give-and-take which is possible with in-person meetings, where the chairperson, reading the room, can give the floor very rapidly to one speaker after another, at times simply with a nod. Chairpersons at in-person meetings can also ask for a quick show of hands to see who support a motion, or see if anyone has an objection. This is much more difficult to do online.

In-person meetings can also provide the speaker with instant feedback, for example in the form of applause, or laughter. Good speakers can read the live audience in the room, and sense whether they are getting their message across in the way they have hoped for, or whether they are losing the attention of the audience.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, para. 26.
Online meetings favour the extroverted and the veteran participants

To a greater extent than with in-person meetings (where it is easier for a good chairperson to seek to promote wider participation by reading body language to call on more speakers), online meetings can be dominated by the more active speakers (usually the “old hands”), who will tend to try to direct the flow of the discussion. Introverted participants find it easier to simply continue to lurk in the background, and not contribute.

Lower participant focus and engagement

Participants are human, and at in-person meetings their mind may wander, or they may spend considerable time having separate conversations with one another, working on their laptop or doing other tasks. The temptation to multitask is all the greater when we are attending a meeting from our own office or home, and we believe that we can safely ignore the meeting shown on our computer monitor to take care of other work. At the office or the home, we can also be distracted by colleagues, family members or visitors at the door.

Scheduling and the impact of time zones

For those online meetings that cross time zones – and many online United Nations Crime Programme meetings do – the organizers of the meetings face difficulties in scheduling the meeting so that most of the participants can attend them at a reasonable hour; not too early in the morning, and not too late at night. In the case of meetings with global participation, scheduling will always put those participants at a disadvantage who have to stay awake until the very late hours, or alternatively wake up very early in the morning. For short meetings (at the most a few hours, or one day), this is not unduly difficult. However, if the meeting lasts several days, even the most dedicated participant tuning in from a completely different time zone will have difficulties staying awake.

Benefits of in-person meetings

Higher participant focus and engagement

The benefits of in-person meetings are, understandably, generally the counterpart of the drawbacks of online meetings. One such benefit is that the participants in in-person meetings tend to pay more attention to the matter at hand, since the distractions inherent in sitting by one’s computer at home or at the office are not present. The immediate human connection of being in the same physical space as the speaker and the other participants tends to focus the mind on the subject at hand.

In-person meetings can encourage more active participation

It was noted above that online meetings tend to favour the extroverted or veteran participants, and keep the introverts (and inexperienced) participants more passive. Part of this is due to the fact that formal United Nations Crime Programme meetings tend to follow certain protocols, and have a certain choreography. This may be daunting to first-time participants, who may not know when or how to intervene, or may be hesitant over whether they sufficiently understand the context of the discussions. With in-person meetings, first-timers may turn to a colleague or a Secretariat member, asking for advice or reassurance.

Building trust

The participants at United Nations Crime Programme meetings generally attend in one of two capacities (or a blend of both): as an expert in a particular field, or as a representative of a government, organisation or other entity, putting forward views, concerns and positions. Whether or not an individual participant is effective (in conveying a message, in advocating for a position, in seeking compromise), is closely related to how much the other participants trust him or her as an expert or as a
representative; what kind of impression he or she has made. An in-person meeting is much better than an online meeting at establishing the necessary baseline of trust.

Better communication

Not all communication is verbal. Participants often read non-verbal cues such as body language, hand gestures and facial expressions (which are not always communicated online, and certainly not if the camera is off) when they are forming an opinion of what the speaker is saying. Although these can be read from a computer screen, the image of the speaker is generally only of the face (to the extent that his or her camera is even turned on). Non-verbal cues are easier to detect during in-person meetings.

The reaction of the audience can also amplify parts of the message. With online meetings, these are very difficult, if not impossible, to detect.

Establishing and strengthening professional and personal contacts

Meetings have both formal and informal functions. One of the most important informal functions is networking. An in-person meeting gives greater opportunities than does an online meeting to make an impression and get people interested in one as a colleague and as a person. At the same time, in-person meetings provide the opportunity to follow up on such first impressions, and get to know people better, with informal small talk outside the meeting room. (Once established, as noted above, such contacts can be maintained also through online meetings.)

This strengthening of professional and personal contacts is closely linked to the building of trust noted above. The more you get to know a person as an individual, the better you can assess whether or not you can trust him or her as an expert or representative.

Better conference servicing

United Nations Crime Programme meetings benefit from the preparations made by the conference organizers and the conference support services, such as documentation and interpretation (when this is used). Such services can also be provided online. However, often it is much easier to request and obtain such services on-site, especially if the meeting has already begun.

In addition to the official documents that serve as the basis for the agenda of the meeting, the UNODC, the institutes in the United Nations Crime Programme Network, nongovernmental organizations and other entities often set out their more recent publications and other information on-site.

Smooother transition from one speaker to the next

In an online meeting, the chairperson generally must rely on participants using a “raise hand” (or other similar) icon on their monitor to ask for the floor. In an in-person meeting, by comparison, the chairperson can read the room to pick up even hesitant gestures from a participant indicating that he or she would like to contribute.

Also technically, the shift from one speaker to the next tends to be smoother during in-person meetings.

Greater flexibility for informal negotiation

A major part of many formal United Nations Crime Programme meetings consists of negotiation: the initial drafting and submission of proposals, amending them to reflect the concerns and interests of all the parties involved, and formally adopting them as for example as resolutions. Not all of the negotiation takes place in the meeting room itself, in the course of the formal statements by the various participants. Often the key negotiations take place off the record, when two or more representatives will meet separately to work out a particular point of disagreement. At times, such negotiations may involve difficult diplomatic messages, which can be delivered with more nuance.
in person. When face-to-face, it is also easier to tell (for example from body language) if the message has been understood.\textsuperscript{12}

Such informal negotiations generally need to be conducted with a reasonable expectation of privacy. This is more readily obtained at in-person meetings, where the parties to the negotiations can move over to the side, away from unwanted listeners. At the same time, if the negotiators remain in the meeting room, they can follow events in the meeting itself.

*Introduction to new environments and the opening of new perspectives*

Within the scope of the United Nations Crime Programme, many in-person meetings bring participants to a different country, which can in itself provide new experiences, perspectives and understandings, both inside and outside of the meeting room. Even if the site of the meeting is a familiar one to United Nations Crime Programme meeting veterans, in particular Vienna (quite an international city in itself), the mix of participants from around the world allows for considerable variety.

This is an especially important factor when the meeting lasts longer than just a few days. Participants have the opportunity not only to meet new colleagues coming from totally different backgrounds from around the world, but also to see and hear how a different society works, and perhaps to explore new initiatives and joint projects.

The benefits and drawbacks noted in the preceding sections can be summarised in the following table.

**Table 1. Benefits (+) and drawbacks (-) of online and in-person meetings**

Note: the importance of each benefit and drawback depends on what meeting function is being considered (fact-finding, exchange of information, drafting, training, negotiation etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>significant benefits and drawbacks</th>
<th>online meetings</th>
<th>in-person meetings</th>
<th>comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>costs of participation</td>
<td>+ low costs</td>
<td>- require travel and time costs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ease of organization</td>
<td>+ <em>ad hoc</em> informal meetings and consultations easy to organize</td>
<td>- the cost factor acts as a disincentive to organizing informal meetings and consultations</td>
<td>important for example in fact-finding, exchange of information, drafting</td>
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<tr>
<td>range and number of participants</td>
<td>+ easier to expand range and number</td>
<td>- meeting facilities and travel costs limit range and number</td>
<td>important for inclusiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>participant interaction</td>
<td>- interaction more difficult</td>
<td>+ interaction much easier + informal negotiation easier</td>
<td>important in negotiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td>- non-verbal cues may be overlooked</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td>important in negotiations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>other benefits and drawbacks</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>administrative costs</td>
<td>- higher</td>
<td>+ basic meeting costs only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conference servicing</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participant focus</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participant equality</td>
<td>- online participants may feel they have less input</td>
<td>+ easier for first-time participants to seek advice, get encouragement to speak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control by the chair</td>
<td>+ technically easier</td>
<td>+ chairperson has better possibility of “reading” the room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{12} As noted by the UNODC “especially in multilateral diplomacy, no online meeting will be able to live up to the in-person exchanges and deliberations, when Member States and other stakeholders look for solutions to world problems, engaging in dialogue to make compromises and reach agreements.” Note by the Secretariat on the working methods of the UNODC Governing Bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic, E/CN.7/2020/CRP.21-E/CN.15/2020/CRP.2, UNODC, Vienna 2020, para. 21.
**Table 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>aspect</th>
<th>more difficult, “stiffer”</th>
<th>smoother transition from speaker to speaker</th>
<th>more difficult, “stiffer”</th>
<th>smoother transition from speaker to speaker</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>flow of meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>meeting scheduling</td>
<td>- time zones may cause difficulties</td>
<td>- physical and temporal changes in schedule more difficult</td>
<td>- physical and temporal changes in schedule more difficult</td>
<td>- physical and temporal changes in schedule more difficult</td>
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<tr>
<td>reimagining format</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical difficulties</td>
<td>- difficulties more likely</td>
<td>+ difficulties less likely</td>
<td>- difficulties more likely</td>
<td>+ difficulties less likely</td>
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<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
<td>+ good for reconnecting</td>
<td>+ easier; networking</td>
<td>+ good for reconnecting</td>
<td>+ easier; networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>building trust</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
<td>- more difficult</td>
<td>+ easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new experiences</td>
<td>- less likely</td>
<td>+ more likely</td>
<td>- less likely</td>
<td>+ more likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flow of online meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Is the United Nations Crime Programme shifting in the long run to online or hybrid meetings?**

When assessing whether the United Nations Crime Programme will replace in-person meetings with online or hybrid meetings, it should be kept in mind that such meetings – as indeed any meetings – come in many different forms, with many different constellations of stakeholders (governmental delegations, IGOs, NGOs and civil society representatives, academics, the private sector), and have a variety of formal and informal functions. United Nations Crime Programme meetings include those involving small groups of practitioners discussing the review of implementation of United Nations crime conventions; expert meetings that are designed to plan the collection and analysis of data, or to prepare the draft of standards and norms, or to provide training and technical assistance; meetings of governmental representatives drafting United Nations resolutions and declarations; large ad hoc intergovernmental committees tasked with the drafting of new conventions; all the way to United Nations Crime Commission sessions and United Nations Crime Congresses, with a broad range of participants and a variety of functions.

United Nations Crime Programme meetings also have informal functions, such as networking and the informal exchange of personal and professional information.

**The example of the Kyoto United Nations Crime Congress.** To illustrate the diversity of meetings and meeting functions, the largest United Nations Crime Programme gathering, the United Nations Crime Congresses, can be taken as an example.

The pandemic interrupted the complicated planning of the Fourteenth United Nations Crime Congress, which was originally scheduled to be held in Kyoto on 20 – 27 April 2020. Following intensive negotiations between the UNODC and the Government of Japan (and careful assessment of the progress of the pandemic and of the public health danger posed by holding huge in-person conferences), the Congress was postponed, to be held almost a year later and in a shortened form, on 7 – 12 March 2021.

The Kyoto Congress had the distinction of having been the first major United Nations conference in any field to be organized after the beginning of the pandemic. It will inevitably set the pattern for how this can be done in such unprecedented circumstances.

The Kyoto Congress was organized as a hybrid conference, with about 280 participants on-site and present in the conference halls, and the vast majority – over 5,200 – participating remotely from their office or home all around the world.

The decision was made that the plenary and the Committee sessions would all be live-streamed (webcast), enabling anyone even without registration to follow them, and to benefit from interpretation into all six official United Nations working languages.
The 130 ancillary meetings and the 13 special events were online, allowed registered participants to attend them. (Mr. Gary Hill, who has organized the ancillary meetings at several preceding United Nations Crime Congresses, was efficient in having his huge team of volunteers make this mammoth switch.)

Various protocols had to be developed for the Fourteenth United Nations Crime Congress on who could intervene in the different events. Once a person had registered as a participant through the United Nations portal (whether online or in person), he or she automatically became an observer in the new technical sense of being able to follow online any of the proceedings of the Congress. Observers could also ask for the floor at ancillary meetings and special events, but not in any of the formal sessions of the Congress, i.e., in the plenary and in the sessions of the two Committee.

An accredited participant could also register as a speaker in the plenary session or in the Committees, in which case he or she could request the floor (remotely or in-person) and address the meeting.

Since this was a global conference, the 5,200 online participants came from every time zone in the world. For many of them, this resulted in scheduling difficulties and fatigue. A session beginning at 10:00 in Kyoto meant that it began at 04:00 in Nairobi, 01:00 in London and 19:00 the previous day in Mexico City.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the concerns of many persons that holding a major international conference in the middle of a pandemic is simply not possible, the Fourteenth United Nations Crime Congress was in many senses a “normal” United Nations Crime Congress. For this, the credit very much goes to the commitment and hard work of Japan, the host government, the UNODC, and Mr. Hill’s team.

On-site participants could enjoy the beautiful Congress venue, with a huge plenary hall, a hall for the two Committees, small meeting rooms that had been originally designated for the ancillary meetings and a variety of other meetings, the documentation desk and “pigeon holes,” a coffee stand, three restaurants for delegates, small kiosks providing tourism-related information as well as souvenirs of Kyoto, a large exhibition hall with several kiosks crammed with material and staffed by knowledgeable volunteers, press facilities, the Knowledge Centre, as well as several long corridors lined with the offices for the United Nations Secretariat staff members and other staff servicing the Congress. It is impressive that these same facilities hosted the Fourth United Nations Crime Congress back in 1970, and were not only still quite functional, but very beautiful and well-designed.

The main difference with early United Nations Crime Congresses, of course, is that there were far fewer participants attending the Congress in person: the 280 participants noted above. (This does not include some 70 staff members and others providing various Congress services.) A total of about 90 member states had sent one or more delegates to Kyoto; in many cases, these came from the respective embassy or mission in Tokyo.13

The bulk of the participants – over 5,200 – participated online, from their office or home, wherever they were located around the world. UNODC, conference support and technical staff serviced the Congress remotely from Vienna (and, in the case of several interpreters, serving from interpretation booths located in New York).

As a result of the low number of participants on-site, the Kyoto Congress gave the impression of being a quiet Congress, with few delegates roaming the halls, chatting over coffee, or actually sitting in the meeting halls.14 The 280 registered on-site

13 The Kyoto Congress was attended in all by 5,500 participants from 152 states, 37 intergovernmental organizations, 114 nongovernmental organizations, and 600 individual experts. The New Working Methods of the Governing Bodies of UNODC: From Business Continuity to preparations for the Post-COVID era, E/CN.7/2021/CRP.13-E/CN.15/2021/CRP.7, UNODC, Vienna 2021, para. 11.

14 Even among the 280 participants allowed to attend the Congress in person, restrictions were in place. In addition to the “grounds pass” that all participants were required to have, indicating that they had duly registered at the Congress, they were not granted access to the Kyoto International
participants did not seem like many when they were dispersed into the cavernous plenary hall or the Committee rooms, or to the many meeting rooms.

To provide a sense of the actual attendance in person and online, in Committee 2, which dealt with the prevention of reoffending, and with new technologies and crime, at the peak there were perhaps 50 persons in the room, and some 30-40 persons attending online. (The figures for the first sessions of Committee 1 were about the same.) At the previous United Nations Crime Congresses, in Bangkok in 2005, in Salvador de Bahia in 2010 and in Doha in 2015, the two Committees had hundreds of participants throughout the sessions. Clearly, despite the Kyoto Congress having the highest number of registered participants of any United Nations Crime Congress, active participation was much lower at any one time.

Despite this low attendance on-site, the work of the Fourteenth United Nations Congress was otherwise quite normal. The structure of the Congress – as approved by the General Assembly – was very much a familiar one. The background documentation had been prepared by the UNODC (in some cases, together with the respective institutes in the United Nations Crime Programme Network). Statements were made, issues were raised, and ideas were exchanged, and the Kyoto Declaration was adopted.

As noted, the vast majority of Congress participants attended remotely from around the world. Given that they were located in different time zones, the remote participants obviously became selective in what meetings they join. Had these over 5,200 persons been attending in person in “normal” times, many of them would have roamed from one meeting room to another, just to see what was happening, thus filling what would otherwise be empty seats.

The Kyoto Congress showed both the drawbacks and the benefits of the hybrid model. One drawback is the potential for technical difficulties. Trying to connect over 5,200 online participants, when almost all were using their own equipment and perhaps had limited expertise with computer connections, meant that individual connections would now and then be dropped. A few of the statements during the high-level segment could not be heard because the video message did not come through. The UNODC staff, however, organized test runs and provided trouble-shooting advice, and for example throughout the Workshops in the two Committees, there were very few technical difficulties. Even when there were difficulties and a connection was dropped, in most cases, the Secretariat staff or the speaker was able to find a “fix,” and the intervention could be made at a somewhat later time.

A second drawback of the hybrid model when applied to a global conference is the physical difficulties faced by persons tuning in from different time zones, since many would have to try to stay awake and alert for several hours very late at night or very early in the morning. They would tend to try to link in only for very specific events, discussions or panels, perhaps to give a statement, and then turn off the link after this is done, without doing “virtual roaming” to see what other discussions were underway in other fora at the Congress. As a result, the discussion at the United Nations Crime Congress in Kyoto was not as active and lively as at other United Nations Crime Congresses. Indeed, towards the end of the United Nations Crime Congress, there were so few speakers even in the plenary session that the discussion was closed before the allotted time was over.

A third drawback was related to the exhibitions that have become an integral part of United Nations Crime Congresses. These exhibitions showcase the achievements of various organizations and companies in the area of crime prevention and criminal justice, and are intended to attract the attention of the in-person participants, provide them with information, and draw them into the establishment of professional

Conference Centre unless they had in addition what was called a “floating badge” to attend the plenary, and/or a floating badge to attend either of the Committees. Each national delegation was given three such badges to the plenary and only one badge to the Committees. Each other delegation was given one badge.
relationships. At the Kyoto Congress, with only 280 participants on site, this function remained severely underused.

Perhaps the main drawback to the hybrid model when applied to major conferences such as the United Nations Crime Congresses is that it does not provide the same vibrant mix of different participants gathered in one place, in-person. Quite often, the most rewarding part of conferences is formed by those chance meetings in the corridors and when socializing over coffee, lunch or dinner, random encounters that lead to networking and real exchanges of ideas and experience. The United Nations Crime Congresses have long been a place where members of national delegations, representing many different agencies and fields, could interact with representatives from United Nations special agencies, IGOs, NGOs and individual experts on an equal basis. Networking is a very important function of United Nations Crime Congresses. The 5,200 participants who were online did not have the opportunity to do so.

Some of the benefits of online meetings noted above could also be seen at the United Nations Crime Congress in Kyoto. Obviously, one is the savings to the travel budget. (Whether this results in actual savings at the end of the financial year can, however, be questioned. In many governments and organizations, money originally allotted for travel generally can and will be used also for other purposes, leaving little if any surplus in the budget. One would hope that these resources were put to good use.)

One benefit that could be noted in the high-level segment was that the clear majority of the national statements were given by Ministers or other very senior officials with substantive responsibility for crime prevention and criminal justice in their own government. Even though this was a question of just a brief and often pre-recorded video statement, the fact that ministers make this statement causes them to become aware of the work of United Nations Crime Congresses. Some will undoubtedly become interested, and charge members of their staff to find out what is happening at the Congress, and how the exchange of ideas could help them in their work on the national level.

After the United Nations Crime Congress had been held, consultations were held in Vienna on the follow-up and on the implementation of the Kyoto Declaration. These provided at least one clear example of the benefits of online meetings: the smoothly organised consultations on the proposed Kyoto Model Strategies on the Prevention of Reoffending. Within only a few months of receiving a mandate from the United Nations Crime Commission to proceed, the UNODC organised three half-day consultations with different groups of experts and one informal consultation with PNI members, followed in April 2022 by a similar set of three half-day consultations. The experts identified by the UNODC could well be described as reflecting equitable geographical representation. All of this could be done at a very low cost. In comparison, bringing well-qualified experts from all the regions to Vienna for several days of consultations would have been considerably more expensive and time-consuming.

**Conclusions**

Online and hybrid meetings are here to stay, also in the context of the United Nations Crime Programme. They provide considerable savings in time and travel, and allow more people to participate. To an increasing extent, participants will go online to connect with one another.

However, the United Nations Crime Programme meetings fulfil a number of different functions. A different mix of in-person, online and hybrid meetings appear to be called for in the different contexts. While online and hybrid meetings are particularly useful when experts are discussing specific issues, much of the work in the United Nations Crime Programme continues to involve negotiation, and this is best taken care of face-to-face, with in-person meetings. Similarly, often training can best be conducted in person.
**Conclusions regarding sessions of the United Nations Crime Commission.** Future annual sessions (and annual reconvened sessions) of the United Nations Crime Commission, which in 2020 and 2021 have been held largely online, will presumably be hybrid sessions, once the pandemic has passed. (These sessions are also webcast, so that the general public can follow them.) Allowing some representatives “from the capitals” to intervene online in the discussion will give them the direct possibility of input.

The arguably most important part of the work of the United Nations Crime Commission sessions is the negotiation of draft resolutions for adoption, generally to go on to the Economic and Social Council, and at times all the way to the General Assembly. In 2021, these negotiations were begun online one or two weeks in advance of the session (and the same pattern is expected in 2022). It is not yet clear how successful this innovation is seen to be by the delegations. As has been described above, successful negotiations tend to depend on the personal and professional contacts, as well as on the reading of non-verbal cues, which is best done in person. Participation online in negotiations is technically possible, but cumbersome.

Another element of United Nations Crime Commission sessions is the large number of side events (similar in function to the ancillary events organized at United Nations Crime Congresses), which are devoted to specific themes, and generally consist of prepared presentations, followed by discussions. These can also readily adapt to the hybrid model, which would allow experts to participate from anywhere around the world. However, the networking function of such side events – bringing persons with specific interests together into the same room – is best accomplished through in-person participation.

**Conclusions regarding sessions and meetings related to the two United Nations crime conventions.** The two United Nations Crime Conventions (UNTOC and UNCAC) have both established a Conference of States Parties. In order to review implementation and promote adherence to the provisions of the two conventions, several other bodies have been set up on specific issues, involving the organization of several meetings a year. During 2020 and 2021, also these have largely been held with online participation. Since several of the sub-bodies deal with specific issues, the meetings last only a day or two, and they may have even more tightly drawn items on the agenda of individual meetings, they would seem to benefit from greater online participation from “experts from the capitals.”

However, sessions of the Conferences of States Parties involve a considerable amount of negotiation of resolutions, and thus the role of in-person participants will presumably remain significant.

The review of implementation of the UNCAC relies extensively on country visits in which individual reviewers from two states parties, accompanied by UNODC staff, visit the state party under review to become acquainted with implementation in that country, and discuss specific issues. Such meetings may raise sensitive issues, and their success relies considerably on mutual trust. The personal and professional relationships encouraged by in-person meetings would thus seem to be the most appropriate. Review of implementation of UNTOC, in turn, follows a somewhat different model, with few country visits. Video technology can usefully be used to bring reviewers and representatives of the state party under review together.

**Conclusions regarding the United Nations Crime Congresses.** Future United Nations Crime Congresses will presumably be organized as hybrid meetings, but it can be expected that once the pandemic passes, they will once again bring thousands of participants on-site, in addition to the thousands that prefer to participate online. Presumably also the governmental host of the Congress would prefer as many participants as possible to attend in person, since hosting a Congress provides it with an opportunity to showcase not only its achievements in crime prevention and criminal justice, but also its hospitality and commitment to international cooperation.
It can be expected in particular that the high-level segment will have a greater balance between online and in-person speakers, which will strengthen the participation at the highest level of government.

**Conclusions regarding United Nations Crime Programme meetings and PNI work related to technical assistance.** Although meetings of the United Nations Crime Commission and the United Nations Crime Congresses may receive more publicity, much of the nitty-gritty of the work of the United Nations Crime Programme takes place in small meetings of experts and practitioners dealing with technical assistance. This may involve for example the preparation of handbooks, training manuals and model laws, as well as the provision of training to practitioners and other stakeholders. The work is done by the UNODC itself, through its network of regional and national offices, as well as by the United Nations Crime Programme Network of Institutes.

This work on technical assistance can be divided roughly into four parts: the identification of needs and the development of programmes; the preparation of material to be used in technical assistance; its delivery to the target audience (generally in the form of training); and programme evaluation. Online contacts can be effectively used, to different degrees, in all four of these phases.

During the need identification phase, consultations can be easily made online with a wide range of stakeholders in the country in question, who can also provide important details on the national or local context, such as problems, existing resources, the relevant governmental structure, and the applicable legislation.

In the preparation of materials and the technical assistance programme, drafts can be readily circulated, with local experts and, as appropriate, international experts providing input. Online meetings can be used to prepare and finalize the drafts. The actual negotiation and adoption of these drafts, however, will continue to be done most effectively during in-person meetings.

Also training can be and is being provided online to practitioners and other stakeholders. There is a considerable amount of experience that has been gained on this format. However, training tends to be most effective when it is provided in person, and the target audience has trust and confidence in the expertise of the trainers. (Follow-up training sessions, in turn, can often readily be done also online.)

In evaluating the results of the programme, a wide range of stakeholders can be interviewed individually or together online. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment than what would be possible with cost-intensive in-person meetings.

**Conclusions regarding the informal functions of United Nations Crime Programme meetings.** The importance of the informal functions of United Nations Crime Programme meetings should not be overlooked. These are largely achieved through in-person meetings, which strengthen relationships, instil trust and confidence in one another, and often provide many unanticipated personal and professional benefits.

As a final conclusion, it can be noted that the pandemic, as tragic as it has been, provides a learning opportunity. It has led to a considerable change in how United Nations Crime Programme meetings have been conducted. Online meetings and hybrid meetings can bring many advantages compared to in-person meetings. Once the pandemic is over, many meetings will continue to be held in a hybrid format. This offers an opportunity to reassess how the virtual environment can be better harnessed to make United Nations Crime Programme meetings more representative, and bring in more expertise as well as a broader range of views and concerns. There will undoubtedly be more information to process. However, a more inclusive and thorough exchange of views and experiences can lead to more productive meetings, a better outcome, and ultimately, a United Nations Crime Programme that better serves member states in improving crime prevention and reforming their criminal justice systems to be more effective, fair and humane.