

23 November 2020

English only

**Commission on Narcotic Drugs**  
**Reconvened sixty-third session**  
Vienna, 2–4 December 2020  
Item 4 (c) of the provisional agenda\*  
**Strategic management, budgetary and administrative questions: Working methods of the Commission**

**Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice**  
**Reconvened twenty-ninth session**  
Vienna, 3–4 December 2020  
Item 3 (c) of the provisional agenda\*\*  
**Strategic management, budgetary and administrative questions: Working methods of the Commission**

## **Note by the Secretariat on the working methods of the UNODC Governing Bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic\*\*\***

### *Summary*

This Conference Room Paper has been prepared by the Secretariat to the Governing Bodies in response to a request made during one of the Extended Bureau Meetings of the Commissions.

With the COVID-19 pandemic the world is facing an unprecedented crisis. A crisis that also poses a number of challenges to the well-established intergovernmental processes in the United Nations system, including those of the of the UNODC Governing Bodies, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ). In March 2020, shortly before the first lockdown in Austria, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs successfully concluded its regular 63rd session. The regular 29th session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, as well as the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, that was scheduled to be held in April in Kyoto, Japan, had to be postponed in light of the pandemic.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, ensuring business continuity of the Commissions has been the top priority of the Secretariat to the Governing Bodies, which has been working on innovative solutions, thereby engaging all stakeholders to address the unprecedented challenges. By quickly adapting to new ways of working, through online and hybrid meetings, the Commissions were able to continue discharging their operational and normative functions, including their function as governing bodies of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. More than nine months into the pandemic, the UNODC Governing Bodies, as forerunners in the United Nations system, have gained considerable experience with online and hybrid meetings, but it has also become evident that maintaining an effective framework for intergovernmental meetings in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, is very labour-intensive and requires adequate and predictable resources.

\* E/CN.7/2020/1/Add.1

\*\* E/CN.15/2020/1/Add.1 <http://undocs.org/E/CN.15/2018/1>

\*\*\* This document has not been edited.



## **I. The impact of COVID-19 on the work of the UNODC Governing Bodies**

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the way in which the UNODC Governing Bodies conduct business. COVID-19 related restrictions, inducing travel impediments, quarantine requirements and limitations to the numbers of meeting participants, have put intergovernmental processes at risk, processes that have been established to allow for inclusive decision-making and the exchange of views, ensuring that all voices are heard. While the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was still able to successfully conclude its regular 63rd session in March 2020 – shortly before the first lockdown in Austria – the regular 29th session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, as well as the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (scheduled to be held in April 2020 in Kyoto, Japan) had to be postponed in light of the pandemic.

2. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, ensuring business continuity of the Commissions was the top priority of the Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies. The sudden and involuntary transition from in-person to online meetings during the first months after the lockdown called for innovative solutions and the engagement of all stakeholders. While remote participation and a certain degree of digitalization was not novel for the Commissions and had been a key topic over the past years, the COVID-19 pandemic set this process on a fast track, forcing both the Office and Member States to adapt to new working methods and communication almost overnight. Early preparations and the commitment of the Chairs of the Commissions to keep the intergovernmental bodies open for business, allowed for a quick adjustment, with the Vienna-based functional Commissions of the ECOSOC taking a forerunner role in the United Nations system.

### **A. A sudden transition from in-person to online meetings**

3. The Secretariat to the Governing Bodies has been providing support to the two Commissions to facilitate a smooth transition from in-person to online and hybrid meetings during the pandemic – within existing resources.

#### **Test meeting and training sessions**

4. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies started immediately after the lockdown with the testing of different platforms for external communication. Based on the approval of the United Nations Office of Information and Communications for the Microsoft Teams application for United Nations related communication with external stakeholders, a first test virtual meeting under the auspices of the Chairs of the UNODC Governing Bodies was conducted on 15 April 2020 with Member States. This test call was not only open to all UNODC divisions, but also other Secretariats of the Vienna-based international organizations (International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), etc.) joined. The test call aimed to facilitate a learning process on the conduct of online meetings across the organizations. More than 150 participants explored during the test meeting the accessibility and functionalities of the application, including the possibility to conduct online text negotiations. Following the test meeting, a training session, led by the Information Technology Systems Division of UNOV, was offered to interested delegations.

#### **Common code of conduct**

5. With a view to ensuring orderly conduct during online meetings, the Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies developed a “Participants Guide to Microsoft Teams Meetings”, including based on guidance received from the ECOSOC

Secretariat in New York. The guide provides an overview of how participants can join the Teams meetings using different devices, as well as information on troubleshooting and rules of engagement during the meeting. The guide was continuously updated, based on the experiences made by the various Secretariats, and served as the blueprint for all UNODC supported intergovernmental processes. With the start of the use of online interpretation platforms, participants' and observers' guides have been developed and adapted in cooperation with Conference Management Services.

#### **Sub-Task Team on Intergovernmental Processes as affected by COVID-19**

6. In April 2020, UNODC set up an inter-divisional task team on the COVID-19 response, covering all areas related to the work of the Office. One of the sub-task teams established is dedicated to the work of the intergovernmental bodies for which UNODC acts as Secretariat. The sub-task team on "Intergovernmental Processes as affected by COVID-19" is led by the Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies. Comprised of representatives from the Secretariat to the Governing Bodies, the Organized Crime Branch, the Corruption and Economic Crime Branch, Conference Management Services and the Information Technology Service of the Division for Management, the members of the sub-task team have been meeting on a regular basis to discuss challenges and opportunities, as well as exchange on lessons learnt in the organization of intergovernmental meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies also invited other Vienna-based international organizations, including the International Atomic Energy Agency, to join meetings of the sub-task team and report on challenges and lessons learnt in the conduct of online and hybrid meetings.

7. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies has throughout the pandemic been in close contact with the Secretariats to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council to receive guidance, and exchange on lessons learnt and developments with regard to working modalities in the respective bodies.

#### **Testing online interpretation platforms**

8. The Secretariat to the Governing Bodies, along with other members of the sub-task team, participated in the testing of online interpretation platforms, including Interprefy, Kudo and Interactio. The testing was conducted under the leadership of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in New York, and Conference Management Services in Vienna, and paved the way for the organization of online and hybrid meetings in the six official languages of the United Nations.

#### **UN system-wide Informal Network of Secretariats to Governing bodies**

9. In addition to the regular exchange with the Secretariat of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, the Secretariat to the Governing Bodies is also part of an informal United Nations system-wide network of Secretariats to governing bodies. The United Nations Governing Body Secretariats network (UNGBS) ensures coordination and exchange of good practices in the United Nations Governance system and meets once a year to discuss issues specific to governance of their respective organization. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic the UNGBS exchanged online information including on remote and hybrid working modalities, the use of different online platforms, the use of the INDICO registration system and on virtual decision-making processes in the governing bodies. The Secretariat to the Governing Bodies is contributing experiences and challenges related to the work of the Vienna-based functional commissions of the ECOSOC. Participating entities in that network include among others the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Bank, the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Food and Agriculture Organization

(FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

### **E-learning**

10. To help mitigate the impact of a lack of in-person meetings, including in-person training, it is essential to ensure easy and hands-on access to important information on the mandates, policies and activities of the two Commissions. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies has since the outbreak of the pandemic worked on the development of eLearning tools and concepts for online training delivery to facilitate information and knowledge sharing in an online format. The provision of extrabudgetary resources allowed for the development of an eLearning tool on the normative functions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs under the three international drug control conventions. The course “Introduction to Scheduling” is targeting Member States’ delegates involved in the work of the Commission, as well as all other stakeholders interested in the CND and the international drug control system and is available online on the Commission’s website.<sup>1</sup> Another activity of the Secretariat in support of the implementation of all international drug policy commitments, following-up to the 2019 Ministerial Declaration, are the national implementation workshops offered to interested Member States. With the COVID-19 related travel impediments, the Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies organized the first online implementation workshop on the implementation of all international drug policy commitments, following-up to the 2019 Ministerial Declaration, with the Government of Kenya in September 2020.

## **B. Online and Hybrid Meetings – Conducting Business during the pandemic**

11. The Commissions quickly adapted to the new working modalities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of April 2020 organized online meetings, including briefings, informal meetings and consultations of the standing open-ended intergovernmental working group on improving the governance and financial situation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (FINGOV), as well as meetings of the Extended Bureaux of the Commissions. By November, the Commissions had organized in an online or hybrid format, five meetings of the Extended Bureau of the CCCPJ and nine meetings of the Extended Bureau of the CND, as well as 11 meetings of the FINGOV working group.

12. On 12 June, the Commissions hosted a joint online high-level special event in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The special event was organized with a view to raising awareness for the commitments made in 1995 in Beijing, in particular in relation to the work of the Vienna-based Commissions and discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting women and girls. After introductory remarks by the CND and CCPCJ Chair as hosts of the meeting, the UNODC Executive Director addressed the Commission. The meeting was also addressed by the Minister of Employment, Economy and Consumer Affairs, in charge of Combating Poverty, Equal Opportunities, and Disabled People, of Belgium, the

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Mandate\\_Functions/scheduling-elearning-tutorial.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Mandate_Functions/scheduling-elearning-tutorial.html)

Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, the President of the Human Rights Council, and the Deputy Executive Director of the UN-Women. The high-level discussion further benefitted from the interventions of the Vienna-based International Gender Champions, as well as representatives of Member States and non-governmental organizations. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (SDG5) is a goal very important in the work of the Vienna-based Commissions, both in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice, as well as drug-related matters. Both Commissions have in recent years considerably increased the attention devoted to the issue of gender equality through the adoption of a number of targeted resolutions as well as through their policy documents and leadership. In line with the UNOV/UNODC Strategy for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2018–2021)<sup>2</sup>, the Secretariat to the Governing Bodies supports the Commissions in integrating a gender dimension into their work, including in parliamentary documents, meeting agendas, working groups and side events, with a view to advancing gender-responsive policies, in particular in the broader framework of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The Secretariat also seeks to assist the Commissions in increasing the active participation of women in all areas of the Commissions' work and its meetings. More information on the efforts to contribute to SDG 5 is available on the Commissions' dedicated website.<sup>3</sup>

13. Every year in June, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs organizes a special event to commemorate the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking and launch the UNODC World Drug Report. This year, the 26 June also marked the 75th anniversary of the Charter of the United Nations. To commemorate this important anniversary, the online CND Special Event on the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking started with a commemorative event, with the UNODC Executive Director and the Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs, addressing the event. Following the commemorative opening, the event continued with the launch of the 2020 World Drug Report, and a dedicated discussion, co-sponsored by the European Union and UNODC, on the impact of COVID-19 on the world drug situation, from various regional perspectives.

14. During the pandemic, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs also continued its considerations on the WHO recommendations on cannabis and cannabis-related substances in accordance with the CND decision 63/14. The Commission held three online topical meetings, focused on the exchange of views among Member States regarding the implications arising from economic, social, legal, administrative and other factors. The meetings were held on 24 and 25 June, on 24 and 25 August 2020 and on 6 and 7 October 2020. On 8 October 2020, the Commission organized an intersessional meeting in a hybrid format, with the participation of Member States and other stakeholders. With its topical meetings, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was the first intergovernmental body supported by the United Nations Secretariat to hold meetings in all six official United Nations languages using an online interpretation platform.

15. On 30 September, the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice held an intersessional meeting, to discuss the preparations for the 29th regular and reconvened session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, as well as the preparations for the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

16. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 meetings of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs were held in an online scaled-down format, back to back, as an extraordinary session from 1–2 October 2020. The extraordinary session brought together over 400 practitioners from over 70 Member States

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/Gender/UNOV-UNODC\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_and\\_the\\_Empowerment\\_of\\_Women\\_2018-2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/Gender/UNOV-UNODC_Strategy_for_Gender_Equality_and_the_Empowerment_of_Women_2018-2021_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/SDG/commissions-2030\\_implementation-of-sdg-5.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/SDG/commissions-2030_implementation-of-sdg-5.html)

and provided an opportunity for all participants to jointly discuss the current situation with respect to addressing and countering the world drug problem in light of COVID-19. The joint meeting was followed by an interactive discussion taking place within the respective membership of each of the subsidiary bodies. A procedural report of the extraordinary session will be brought to the attention of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at its 64th session in 2021. More information on the subsidiary bodies and the extraordinary session is available on the Commission's website.<sup>4,5</sup>

17. On 5 October 2020, a virtual briefing on the preparations for the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice was organized on the occasion of the Third Committee's deliberation on crime prevention and criminal justice for delegations of the United Nations in New York and interested stakeholders. Co-sponsored by UNODC and the Permanent Mission of Japan, the meeting provided an update on the status of preparations for the Crime Congress by the Host Country.

18. On 7 October 2020, a virtual briefing on the work undertaken by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was organized on the occasion of the Third Committee's deliberation on the world drug problem for delegations of the United Nations in New York and interested stakeholders. The briefing, co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Austria to the United Nations in New York and UNODC, included information on the work undertaken by the Commission at its 63rd session, including related to its normative functions under the three international drug control conventions, such as the ongoing consideration of the recommendations by the World Health Organization on cannabis and cannabis-related substances, as well as on action taken on the implementation of all international drug policy commitments, following-up to the 2019 Ministerial Declaration.

19. From 19 to 21 October 2020, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs held the second round of Thematic Discussions, following the adoption of the 2019 Ministerial Declaration. Focused on the exchange of good practices, challenges and lessons learned in the implementation of the international drug policy commitments, the 2020 CND Thematic Discussions brought together national practitioners and policymakers from over 100 United Nations Member States, United Nations entities partners including from WHO, UNAIDS, INCB, OHCHR and IAEA, as well as other intergovernmental and international organizations and civil society experts from around the world. This year's thematic discussions, held in a hybrid format, enabled an interactive and inclusive exchange of good practices and lessons learned in addressing the following challenges identified in the 2019 Ministerial Declaration: insufficient levels of drug treatment and health services; increased number of deaths related to drug use; high rate of transmission of HIV, the hepatitis C virus and other blood-borne diseases associated with drug use; adverse health consequences of and risks associated with new psychoactive substances; and low or non-existent level of availability of internationally controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes.

### **Planning for the first hybrid Crime Congress**

20. The Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice acts as the preparatory body to the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, which is scheduled to be held in Kyoto, Japan, from 7–12 March, with pre-session consultations on 6 March 2021. Informal consultations have resumed in September in a hybrid as well as online format, adapting to the COVID-19 related developments and restrictions. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies is working with the host country of the 14th Congress to organize the first hybrid Congress, with an in-person component and online-component, allowing interested experts from around the world to join the deliberations. More information on the

---

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Subsidiary\\_Bodies/Subsidiary-Bodies\\_Index.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Subsidiary_Bodies/Subsidiary-Bodies_Index.html)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Subsidiary\\_Bodies/extraordinary-sessions-subsidiary-bodies.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Subsidiary_Bodies/extraordinary-sessions-subsidiary-bodies.html)

preparations for the 14th Crime Congress is available on the official website<sup>6</sup> and the Congress website of the host country Japan.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Turning challenges into opportunities – and lessons learnt

21. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalization allowed to reduce exposure and comply with social distancing, while ensuring business continuity. However, 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. Digitalization has during the pandemic bridged the gaps left by lockdowns and social distancing, and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice have been at the forefront of experimenting with new communication tools and platforms, keeping open for business and quickly adapting to the changing dynamics and progression of the virus in the host country.

22. The meetings the Commissions conducted in an online or hybrid format showed an incremental increase of Member States' experts and stakeholders participating in the meetings from around the world. For example, each of the CND topical meetings on the WHO recommendations on cannabis and cannabis-related substances brought together on average over 600 national experts discussing the impact of the recommendations. The CND annual thematic discussions, that were held in a hybrid format in October 2020, enjoyed the participation of over 500 experts from over 100 Member States, United Nations entities, international and intergovernmental organizations, and civil society. Over 20,000 visits to the livestream of the discussions were recorded over the three days' meeting. The negotiations on the outcome document of the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice have resumed despite the pandemic, using hybrid and online meetings, including line-by-line negotiations on draft text.

23. With the lessons learnt and experience gained over the past months, it is important to consider how the opportunities presented by the special conditions arising from COVID-19 can be captured in order to “build back stronger” after the pandemic. Adding an online component to the in-person meetings of the Commissions, also post-COVID-19, would further enhance the inclusiveness of the work of the Commissions.

24. The experiences gained have, however, also made it evident that maintaining an effective framework for intergovernmental meetings in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and adding an online component, is labour intensive and requires adequate and predictable financial resources to support both the professional and the administrative support levels. Experience further showed that with mobility restrictions and sanitary measures further inhibiting in-person meetings, there is even a stronger need for a comprehensive meeting architecture that facilitates meaningful online participation, while also ensuring, to the extent possible, an in-person component.

25. To build and maintain a structured functioning framework for the smooth and secure conduct of online and hybrid meetings, sufficient resources, tools, capacity and equipment are required. The in-person component requires additional work, for example, due to the need to distribute updated information on the COVID-19 related measures to delegations and track their contacts through contact sheets. Further, the Secretariat cannot perform all of its support functions online but needs to secure a stable in-person presence during large meetings, which requires exact planning and risk mitigation with regard to staff members with individual health risks or sudden quarantine obligations. Many ancillary processes between the Secretariat and

<sup>6</sup> [www.crimecongress.org](http://www.crimecongress.org)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.moj.go.jp/KYOTOCONGRESS2020/en/>

Commission members that are usually facilitated by personal encounters need to be organized in innovative and creative ways.

26. The administrative support of virtual or hybrid meetings is particularly work intensive, especially with many meetings happening back to back, sometimes not even with a one-day break in between. Registration is more complex due to the multiple roles of delegates (in-person, online with speakers' link, virtual with observers' link, online without observers' link). Registered delegations must be admitted both in person (by administering traditional badges) and also online (by managing the virtual lobby of meeting platforms). Troubleshooting requests from delegations experiencing difficulties with accessing the meeting, both in-person and online, have multiplied and need to be answered without delay. In the meantime, regular substantive and administrative functions carried out by the Secretariat during Commissions' meetings remain (notetaking, drafting and processing in-session documentation, coordinating with panel speakers, etc.).

27. Online and hybrid formats can add a layer of inclusiveness, by expanding the scope of participation also to those delegates or experts who would not be able to join an in-person only format. Another lesson learnt is that as opportunities for informal exchange and learning become scarce, alternative ways of knowledge-sharing need to be strengthened, including through the development of e-learning tools explaining the different areas of work and working methods of the Commissions.

28. The Secretariat wishes to thank those Member States who have provided extra-budgetary resources, without which it would not have been possible to ensure business continuity. The Secretariat is working on innovative ideas to further strengthen the capacities of the Commissions to integrate the online component in their work during the remaining duration of the pandemic and post-COVID-19, and to further build on the experiences made over the past months. Ideas include, amongst others, the creation of a virtual networking space for delegations, with a view to facilitating the CND and CCPCJ day-to-day business and coordination among Permanent Missions – in and outside of Vienna. The Secretariat to the UNODC Governing Bodies stands ready to discuss these ideas and related funding needs with interested delegations.

---