

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
110th Meeting
Geneva (online), 10 July 2020

EXCOM/CONCLU/110

CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS

Meeting of the Executive Committee
10 July 2020

FORMAL SEGMENT

Item 1 – Adoption of the agenda.

1. The provisional draft agenda for the 110th meeting was adopted.

Item 2 - Update on Special Procedures during COVID-19 period.

(a) Decisions taken under silence procedure from April 2020 to June 2020

2. The Chair recalled that EXCOM had adopted special procedures in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure business continuity, including, inter alia, the submission of decisions taken at informal meetings to a silence procedure for adoption. Similarly, in May 2020, EXCOM had adopted similar special procedures for UN/CEFACT. He invited EXCOM to take note of the decisions adopted under these procedures, as contained in document ECE/EX/2020/L.4.

3. The representatives of the Russian Federation and of the European Union and its member States expressed appreciation for the work of the secretariat which allowed for business critical decisions to be taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The Chair concluded that EXCOM takes note of the decisions contained in annexes I and II of document ECE/EX/2020/L.4.

(b) Extension of Special Procedures during COVID-19 period.

5. Pointing out that the UN Office in Geneva had not yet resumed its pre-pandemic capacity for meeting servicing, and the potential for a resumption of COVID-mitigation measures, the Chair requested EXCOM to consider extending the above-mentioned special procedures until the end of September 2020, on the understanding that they would not be used if formal meetings could resume in the required capacity prior to that date.

6. The representative of the European Union and its member States said the special procedures should reflect the situation of the host country. She had no objection to the decision but emphasized that the special procedures should only be used when meetings could not be held in person.

7. The representative of the Russian Federation had no objection to the extension. He hoped the secretariat would continue notifying Permanent Missions of meetings held in the virtual format and of the decisions adopted therein. He also hoped interpretation could be ensured for virtual meetings.

8. The Chair concluded that EXCOM authorizes the Chair of the Commission to continue using the special procedures during the COVID-19 period, initially adopted on 6 April 2020, for taking decisions of the Executive Committee until 30 September 2020. EXCOM extends the special procedures approved for the Inland Transport Committee and the Committee on

Sustainable Energy, adopted on 29 May 2020, until 30 September 2020. EXCOM requests the Secretariat to continue exploring possible solutions to the issue of interpretation in remote meetings in accordance with Rules of Procedure 18 and 19, with a view of proposing solutions to the membership as soon as possible. EXCOM underlines that these arrangements are exceptional and time-limited and requests the Secretariat to report back to EXCOM on their implementation throughout the COVID-19 situation.

INFORMAL SEGMENT

Item 3 - Response by the Economic Commission for Europe to the COVID-19 pandemic

9. The Executive Secretary presented informal document 2020/37 on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the UNECE region, strategic considerations for UNECE's support to member States in recovering from the crisis and current response activities. Given that a sustained and effective organizational response requires drawing lessons from initial interventions and an active dialogue among the membership to understand evolving needs and shape demand-driven future action, she proposed that the COVID-19 response be further addressed in the UNECE subsidiary bodies as well as at the 69th commission session. In addition, she noted that the business constraints encountered during the crisis had highlighted a potential for new ways of working and strengthening collaboration. In order to examine this potential and possibly integrate it into the design and planning of new activities, she proposed that the secretariat could review existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements, including for capacity-building activities, to determine an effective mix of virtual consultations, hybrid meetings and in person meetings. This review could take the form of an extrabudgetary project.

10. The representative of the United States commended the secretariat on the quick pivot to the virtual format, the forward-leaning initiatives, creativity and flexibility displayed during the crisis. He recommended to keep programmes of work within regional and substantive mandates to maximize in house expertise. He urged member States and UNECE to look beyond the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when considering their COVID-19 recovery, as some of the needs arising from the crisis may be outside the scope of the SDGs and necessitate different prioritization. He encouraged the secretariat to explore new working methods without incurring unnecessary travel or cost.

11. The representative of Belarus supported the inclusion of the COVID-19 topic in the agenda of the 2021 Commission session and expressed interest in the extrabudgetary project proposed by the Executive Secretary.

12. The representative of the European Union and its member States said that the document highlighted areas that were very relevant for the COVID-19 response. Recovery would need strong regional and cross-border cooperation and UNECE tools should be used to strengthen such cooperation in addition to building up national capacities. She saw value in the nexus approach outlined in the document, as harnessing synergies across sectors would allow for a better response to new challenges, and encouraged all subsidiary bodies to adapt their programmes of work accordingly while keeping the SDGs as the key guiding principles. Regarding the extrabudgetary project proposed by the Executive Secretary, she said that it should be solution-oriented, and include recommendations for future work and possible implications thereof. She also noted that virtual meetings had limits as well as advantages and

said she would welcome further recommendations on how to build on the lessons learned and make the work of the Commission more resilient.

13. The representative of the Russian Federation supported the statements by the preceding speakers and seconded the questions posed by the representative of the European Union and its member States regarding the extrabudgetary project.

14. The representative of France aligned with the statements by the representatives of the European Union and its member States, the Russian Federation and Belarus. She believed UNECE could continue the crucial work in its subsidiary bodies and bring an immediate response to facilitate daily life in member States, thanks to its flexibility and inventiveness. She thought the region could draw lessons from the crisis to become more resilient and build back better.

15. The representative of Switzerland welcomed document 2020/37 and said it was crucial for all organizations to adapt to the situation and contribute to the COVID-19 response as much as possible within their mandates. He noted that the upcoming Forum of Mayors would focus on resilient cities. This would allow countries to gain an enhanced understanding of concrete challenges and possible ways to support the region in responding to the current crisis. Therefore he welcomed additional updates on how UNECE and its subsidiary bodies would continue to contribute to the COVID-19 response.

16. In response to the questions about the extrabudgetary project, the Executive Secretary pointed out that a large number of UNECE meetings had had to be cancelled or postponed. Staff working from home had facilitated 458 remote meetings, 391 of which had included external stakeholders. This demonstrated that UNECE had been able to adjust its working methods. While most of these virtual arrangements were temporary, she thought others might prove beneficial even after a resumption of normal working methods. She therefore proposed to study the different dimensions of the matter, such as meeting servicing and consultation arrangements for different types of UNECE bodies and different kinds of content; procedural implications; technical requirements (tools, licences, IT skills); resource requirements etc. Should member States agree, the secretariat would develop an extrabudgetary project for consideration which might entail hiring a consultant to engage with the bureaux of UNECE subsidiary bodies on conference servicing, IT and facilities issues. In addition to an analysis of UNECE's experience, the project would develop recommendations on how to introduce effective practices into UNECE's work in the long term. The findings of the project would be presented to EXCOM for further consideration. She encouraged delegations interested in possibly financing such a project to contact the secretariat.

17. The representative of Azerbaijan said UNECE had demonstrated an ability to quickly adapt to unprecedented circumstances, and that most meetings had been cancelled due to procedural matters rather than an inability on the part of the organization to deliver on its mandates. She supported the preparation of a project with recommendations that would allow the organization to draw lessons from the current situation.

18. The Chair concluded that EXCOM takes note of informal document 2020/37 containing information on the COVID-19 crisis: impact, initial response and further implications for UNECE work. EXCOM invites relevant subsidiary bodies of the Commission to discuss how to reflect a COVID-19 response that supports further progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in their Programmes of Work and requests the secretariat to present

an overview of these recommendations to EXCOM for consideration. EXCOM requests the UNECE secretariat to include its COVID-19 response into further programme planning for the sixty-ninth session of the Commission. EXCOM welcomes the efforts by the UNECE secretariat to step up its engagement at the country level and within the regional UN system in the context of the COVID-19 response and its commitment to develop working methods and organisational arrangements that facilitate this enhanced engagement, subject to available resources. EXCOM requests the UNECE secretariat to present a proposal for an extrabudgetary project on a review of existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements, including for capacity-building activities, drawing on the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis response and provide recommendations to EXCOM for consideration.

Item 4 – Preparations for the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe

19. The Executive Secretary recalled that the 109th meeting of EXCOM had designated the theme of the high-level segment of the 2021 Commission session as “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”. Further, it had invited relevant subsidiary bodies of UNECE and the secretariat to consider how they may contribute, as appropriate, to this theme, within their respective mandates, ongoing work and existing resources, and while making full use of the existing nexuses. She presented informal document 2020/38 which contains a stocktake of relevant UNECE activities prepared in consultation with the bureaux of UNECE subsidiary bodies. The latter had also provided elements for a draft high-level statement and decisions to be adopted by the session, which would be presented to EXCOM for consideration in the autumn of 2020 after further refinement. The four nexus publications whose preparation had been approved by EXCOM as part of an extrabudgetary project were currently under peer review and would be submitted for translation and processing in December 2020 along with the remaining documentation for the session. UNECE had also identified a number of partners with expertise in circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources and was exploring ways to deepen its collaboration with them. She hoped that delegations would start to engage with capitals to ensure high level representation at the meeting and formally agree to hold the session on 20 and 21 April 2021.

20. The Chair believed that a fruitful way for countries to engage with the session could be to submit commitments related to circularity and sustainable practices at the country and transboundary level. He encouraged delegations to use the summer to discuss with their capitals what format this commitment might take. He said commitments should have a measurable impact and contribute to achieving the SDGs.

21. The representative of the European Union and its member States took note of the stocktake of UNECE activities and looked forward to discussions in the plenaries of UNECE subsidiary bodies on possible future focus areas that could contribute to the chosen theme. Circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources were key priorities for the EU and had become even more important in light of the calls for a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. She therefore supported the inclusion of new challenges resulting from the pandemic into the discussions at the session. In March 2020, the EU had adopted an action plan on circular economy that would make sustainable products the norm in the EU, empower consumers, address the most resource-intensive areas with high potential for circularity, decrease waste and lead global efforts on circularity. She encouraged member States to respond to contribute to the session with similar commitments.

22. The representative of the Russian Federation had no objection to the draft decisions proposed in informal document 2020/38. However, he inquired as to the meaning of the phrase “transboundary level” as used in the third paragraph of this draft decision.

23. The representative of the United States had no objection to the draft decision. He supported the outreach to potential partners with expertise on the chosen theme, including those from the private sector who had significant experience in responding to and driving policies related to the sustainable use of natural resources and the circular economy. He suggested that UNECE add an additional line of inquiry to those already listed in the report which would focus on leveraging the experience of the private sector as a driver of sustainable and circular practices.

24. The representative of Switzerland welcomed the engagement of UNECE subsidiary bodies on the theme and looked forward to the results of this exercise and to the four nexus publications.

25. In response to the representative of the Russian Federation, the Executive Secretary explained that the word “transboundary” had been used to capture the fact that materials circulated not only nationally but across borders, making circularity relevant at the cross-border level. She encouraged delegations to facilitate contact with private sector partners that they found relevant.

26. The Chair concluded that EXCOM thanks the secretariat for the information update on the preparation of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission and looks forward to receiving further periodic update on this matter. Pursuant to Rules 1 and 2 of the Rules of Procedure of the Commission, EXCOM decides to hold the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe on 20-21 April 2021 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. EXCOM encourages the membership of UNECE to explore how they can contribute to the high-level theme of the sixty-ninth session, “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”, and in particular to consider possible national commitments to strengthen circularity and sustainable practices at the country and transboundary level.

Item 5 - Annual report of the Economic Commission for Europe on technical cooperation activities 2019

27. The Executive Secretary presented informal document 2020/39 containing the annual report on technical cooperation activities for 2019, highlighting that extrabudgetary contributions had increased by 17.7 per cent during the year.

28. The representative of the United States appreciated the transparency provided by the report and said the document was a testament to the breadth and depth of UNECE’s work. He noted that there was no mention of collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on the technical cooperation activity involving four trainings on the Water Convention in Cameroon, Dakar, Uganda, and Abidjan, and encouraged UNECE to develop such partnerships for work outside the UNECE region.

29. The representative of the European Union and its member States noted that the European Union and its member States together had provided over 10 million USD to UNECE. She thanked other large donors such as Switzerland and the Russian Federation.

30. The representative of the Russian Federation said his government would continue supporting projects in CIS countries and especially in Central Asia.

31. The representative of Switzerland welcomed the increase in extrabudgetary contributions resulting from the good work of the secretariat and said that Switzerland remained committed to UNECE's mandate and would continue to engage.

32. The representative of Azerbaijan said that the country had enhanced its cooperation with UNECE in the wake of the Executive Secretary's visit to Baku in 2018 and was working closely with the organization on a number of ongoing projects. She informed EXCOM that the Memorandum of Understanding on national policy dialogues on integrated water management had been signed in Baku and would be transmitted to the secretariat. The government was interested in organizing a workshop on evidence-based policy and stakeholder cooperation together with UNECE. The State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan had also requested UNECE assistance to align national customs systems to eTIR. She thanked UNECE for the support and looked forward to future cooperation.

33. The Executive Secretary underlined that extrabudgetary funds would become an even more important source of financing as the UN was undergoing a cash crisis and invited all member States to increase their contributions. In response to the representative of the United States, she noted that UNECE indeed collaborated with other Regional Commissions and that a joint event on water had been planned with ECA for June 2020 but subsequently postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

34. The Chair concluded that EXCOM takes note of the annual report on technical cooperation activities for 2019.

Item 6 - Important new updates: briefing by the Executive Secretary

35. On the topic of budgetary matters, the Executive Secretary informed EXCOM that the Regular Budget (RB) financial situation continued to be a challenge for the broader UN secretariat. At UNECE, recruitment of RB posts had been frozen since April 2020 in line with instructions by the Secretary-General. The freeze was expected to remain in place for some time. The UN Controller had recently advised that, should sufficient contributions be received from member States, an easing of restrictions could be expected before the end of the year. As at 31 May 2020, UNECE had 9 (4.8 per cent) vacant posts. The Executive Secretary had presented the UNECE Proposed Programme Budget for 2021 to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and to the Committee for Programme and Coordination in June. The proposal was for a zero growth budget at a level of \$34,033,300 after recosting. She called for the continued support from member States at the budget discussions in New York.

36. The Executive Secretary informed EXCOM that in June 2020, Ghana had become the third country from outside the region to accede to the Water Convention.

37. The Executive Secretary informed EXCOM about the following recent meetings and events:

- i. 22-24 June, Geneva: 68th plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians

38. The representative of Switzerland, in his capacity as co-chair of the Steering Committee for the Forum of Mayors, made a presentation to EXCOM on the preparations for the event, which would be held on 6 October 2020 in Geneva.

Item 7 – Extrabudgetary projects (for approval)

39. Regarding the extrabudgetary project contained in informal document 2020/40, the representative of Ukraine expressed support for the People-first PPP model, especially in the context of building capacity to achieve the 2030 Agenda, and said the implementation of the project would contribute to progress towards the SDGs in his country.

40. The representative of the European Union and its member States noted that the project was a joint activity of several UN partners and inquired who would implement it.

41. The Director of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division explained that this was part of a large project with UNICEF, WHO, UNDP and the Resident Coordinator in Kiev and responded to the need for an integrated environmental and social response in Ukraine. Document 2020/40 contained the part of the project that would be implemented by UNECE, who would hire the necessary consultants and manage them.

42. Regarding the extrabudgetary project contained in informal document 2020/41, the representative of the European Union and its member States thanked the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Road Safety for his continued commitment to make road safety a global priority.

43. The Chair concluded that EXCOM approves the extrabudgetary projects contained in informal documents 2020/40 and 2020/41.
