Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Environmental Policy

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The Eighth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference

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Various options for format of group discussion

Note by the secretariat

Summary

At its nineteenth session in October 2013, the Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) agreed to organize the Eighth Environment for Europe (EfE) Ministerial Conference in 2016 and mandated its Bureau, with support from the secretariat, to prepare for the CEP session in 2014 an updated proposal for a possible framework for the next conference (ECE/CEP/2013/2, para. 116 (h) (ii)).

Following up to that mandate the Bureau, with support from the secretariat, prepared an official document presenting the proposed format for preparing the Eighth EfE Conference, including on the prospective format and outline of the agenda of the next ministerial conference (ECE/CEP/2014/9, section II). The secretariat prepared the present paper as a complementary note to section II of the official document. The paper provides an overview of various formats of group discussion, which could be considered as potential formats for organizing relevant agenda items of the Eighth EfE Conference.

The paper aims to facilitate the discussion by CEP on the preparations for the Eighth EfE Conference.

Introduction

1.   The Environment for Europe (EfE) Reform Plan contains specific provisions regarding the format of the Conference, including with a view to enhancing the interactive high-level discussion. In that regard, the Plan states that the discussions at the Conference should be arranged in an interactive manner and combine various types of sessions, e.g., plenary sessions, round tables and moderated panel discussions, with a limited number of main speakers from different stakeholders (e.g., UN ECE member States, EfE partners and major groups). When possible, interactive sessions, such as round tables, could be run in parallel (ECE/CEP/S/152 and Corr.1, annex I, para. 13 (c)).

2.   The Results of the survey on the promotion of the EfE process and the outcomes of its ministerial conferences (ECE/CEP/2013/21, annex II, section 6.1–6.1.3 and annex III, section 6.1–6.1.3) and the Proposed framework for preparing the Eighth EfE Ministerial Conference (ECE/CEP/2014/9, section II, paras. 44–46 and annex) included suggestions by participating member States and stakeholders for improving the interactive discussions formats at future ministerial conferences.

3.   Several of those suggestions, as well as numerous others, are presented in the present document. The document provides a list of alternative types of interactive discussions, one or several of which may be particularly beneficial for the purposes of the Conference.

4.   The length of time available and the number of attendees allowed for each format presented in the current document may be adapted, depending on the space and technological availabilities at the Conference centre, and on the budget of the host country. Several of these options may also be combined to occur in parallel.

5.   Additionally, it must be noted that plenary sessions will continue to be structured as they have been in the past, and that the options presented here would only alter the interactive discussion portion of the conferences.

I.   Proposed formats

6.   The eleven potential discussion formats hereafter presented demonstrate only a portion of available options for interactive discussions. Some of those formats have already been tested at the CEP-related meetings and are more familiar to the CEP members than others.

7.   At the same time, member States and other EfE stakeholders are welcome to send to the secretariat additional options and ideas of formats of group discussion, in particular those which had proven to be effective for a high-level/ministerial interactive multistakeholder discussion.

A.   Panel discussion

8.   The first option is that of a panel discussion, similar in structure to the panel discussions that took place at the recent Regional Ministerial Consultation on Monitoring and Accountability for the post-2015 Development Agenda (Geneva, 15–16 September 2014). In this type of format, a moderator would introduce the topic(s) or question(s) to be addressed during the discussion. A maximum of 5 panellists (3 Ministers, 1 NGO representative, and 1 Business representative) would then take turns presenting their responses to the specified topic(s) or question(s), for a maximum of ten minutes per person.

9.   At the end of each presentation, the moderator will briefly (i.e., one minute or less) summarize the key points of each presentation before introducing the next panellist. At the conclusion of the remarks of all five panellists, the floor will be opened for questions for the panellists, coming from the observing audience of other Ministers and stakeholders, and an interactive discussion would take place, lasting approximately 45 minutes. Alternatively, the floor can be opened twice for discussion: i.e., for up to 20 minutes after the presentation of the first three panellists, and for up to 25 minutes after the last two presentations, including wrapping up the entire panel discussion.

B.   Parallel roundtable discussion

10.   Secondly, a parallel round table discussion format may be used, with a maximum of two round table discussions occurring in parallel, with one of these round table sessions conducted with interpretation in the three official UNECE languages (English, French, and Russian), and the other session conducted in English only (given the potential resource constraints in the host country to ensure additional teams of interpreters and adequate technical equipment). The round table discussions will comprise up to 30 participants, including ministers and heads of delegation of UNECE member States (up to 19 seats), IGOs (up to 2 seats), NGOs

(up to 4 seats), Regional Environmental Centres (RECs, up to 2 seats), and private sector representatives (up to 4 seats).

11.   Each of the round table's parallel sessions will open with introductory remarks by a moderator. Participants in the round table will be invited to engage actively in the discussion, and to address the agreed questions for discussion. In their interventions, participants can address one or more questions for discussion and/or react to the interventions of others.

12.   Speeches that have been prepared in advance will be strongly discouraged during the round tables; instead, participants should exchange views on the theme under discussion. To allow each participant at the round table to intervene at least once during the discussion, the time limit for interventions will be up to three minutes. Following the discussion, the moderator will highlight key points to be brought to the attention of the Conference plenary.

13.   Regarding the responses to the EfE Survey, twenty countries and two other stakeholders "strongly agreed" with continuing with the round table format (AT, BY, BE, BG, FI, GE, DE, GR, HU, IL, KZ, KG, MD, MC, SK, SI, SE, CH, UA, US, BIOTICA, EEB), while five countries and three other stakeholders "somewhat agreed" (HR, CZ, FR, PL, RO, CAREC, Eco Accord, Zhabagly-Manas), and one stakeholder "somewhat disagreed" (Friends of Siberian Forests).

C.   Thematic commission

14.   A "thematic commission" arrangement would involve setting out one or several themes (perhaps the two main topics of the Conference could be used as themes) and creating two "Commissions" under each topic that would bring together groups of 15–20 diverse stakeholders (with most seats going to Ministers or their direct representatives) to address a subtopic of the central theme (each Commission could address a specific question related to the main topics of the conference, for example). To illustrate how this approach might look, we refer to the example of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which set up a portion of their agenda for a recent conference in the following manner:

(a)   Theme 5.2 Strengthening local humanitarian action
Commission A- Migration: ensuring access, dignity, respect for diversity and social inclusion;
Commission B- Furthering the auxiliary role: partnership for stronger National Societies and volunteering development.

(b)   Theme 5.3 Addressing barriers to health care
Commission C- Health Care in Danger: Respecting and protecting health care in armed conflict and other situations of violence;
Commission D- Health inequities: reducing the burden on women and children.

15.   Each Commission would meet in different rooms and would discuss their question/subtopic for approximately 45 minutes. After this time, all of the Commissions would gather together in a central room, where a designated spokesperson from each Commission would present their findings, solutions, additional questions, and main points of discussion in 7 to 10 minutes. After all spokespeople have presented, a general discussion could take place for approximately 30 minutes, including questions from observers who did not participate in the Commissions.

D.   Perspective sessions

16.   An additional option would be to have several concurrent "perspective sessions", wherein different groups of stakeholders take charge of the discussion

(i.e., NGOs are in charge of one discussion, businesses in charge of another, Ministers in charge of a third, etc.). In this format, the central presentation in each session would present that stakeholder group's perspectives on a given topic, question, or set of questions. Their presentation would be followed by an open discussion among 20–30 participants from other stakeholder groups, with additional stakeholders able to attend as observers.

17.   The final 20–30 minutes of the session would be reserved for questions from the observer audience for the stakeholder group. No prepared statements would be allowed, other than the presentation from stakeholder in charge of the session. This type of discussion could be set up to allow for several concurrent presentations (depending on the number of rooms available), or the two-hour time period could be divided between two stakeholder groups on one day, and two other stakeholder groups on another day.

E.   Talk show

18.   A "talk show" discussion panel could also be used to bring together stakeholders and country representatives in a casual conversation. Much like a typical television talk show, a "host" or moderator would interview and converse with "guests", who would be Ministers or representatives from the various stakeholder groups. Each "guest" would speak with the "host" for approximately 15 minutes in a casual, mostly unstructured dialogue revolving around a particular theme, topic, or question. After their conversation, the "guest" would leave the stage or front of the room and another "guest" would take their place.

19.   The same topic or theme could be discussed, or a different topic could be introduced, depending on the wishes of the conference organizers. After 4 or 5 "guests" had had their conversation with the "host", all "guests" would return to form a panel, and a general discussion could take place among the "host", "guests" and audience of observers. This general discussion could last as long as an hour. Depending on the number of rooms available and the overall organization of the conference, several "talk shows" based on different themes could take place concurrently in the conference venue.

F.   Thematic symposia

20.   Yet another option is a more typical "thematic symposia", which would provide an opportunity to present limited and focused statements on one topic. This type of session would be directed by a moderator and would involve three presenters and one discussant. The symposium could be scheduled for two hours, including 20 minute presentations from each speaker, a 15 minute presentation by the discussant, and 45 minutes for open discussion among the panel, moderator, and audience of observers.

G.   Revolving round table

21.   A "revolving round table" discussion would involve 5 or 6 small groups of 10 to 12 people each (including a combination of Ministers, and NGO, IGO, and Business representatives), with each group spending approximately 15 minutes at a table with a moderator, who will record the main points of the discussion. Each table will focus on a different, but inter-related, issue or question related to the topics of the conference.

22.   As the groups rotate, the table moderators will give a brief summary of the points raised so far, thus allowing the new group(s) to pick up where the previous group(s) left off. After enough rounds of discussions have occurred for each group

to have participated at each table, the cumulative key points from each table will be presented to the entire group by each table moderator, and a final group discussion of approximately 30 minutes will follow.

H. Question time

23. One suggestion that was received from feedback to the EfE survey, conducted in 2013, and that is listed in the Proposed framework for preparing the Eighth EfE Ministerial Conference was to hold discussions in the format of the British Broadcasting Company's television show, "Question Time". In this format, the main panel consists of one moderator and four expert panellists of diverse backgrounds. Questions about 2 to 3 pre-determined topics are prepared by audience members in advance of the panel, and the moderator picks several questions among these that will be addressed during the one-hour session.

24. Panellists are not informed of the questions before the discussion begins and must answer each question without preparation. Each panellist is given 2 to 3 minutes to answer the question. Once all panellists have responded, the other panellists are given a chance to comment/respond for 3 to 4 minutes, and then audience members are given a chance to comment for up to 5 minutes. This process continues through several questions and topics until the conclusion of the one-hour session.

25. Depending on the time and space available, this option could be extended to a two-hour session, or a new set of panellists and/or a new moderator could replace the first group, beginning a second round of questions on the same topic or on a new topic. Multiple "Question Time" sessions could happen concurrently, given adequate space and technology in the conference venue.

26. Regarding the responses to the EfE Survey, eleven countries (AT, BG, GE, GR, HU, IT, KZ, KG, RO, SE, CH) "strongly agreed" with the proposal for a "Question Time"-type of format, with an additional seven countries and six other stakeholders that "somewhat agreed" (BY, BE, CZ, FI, FR, DE, PL, BIOTICA, CAREC, Eco Accord, EEB, Friends of Siberian Forests, Zhabagly-Manas).

I. Fishbowl conversation

27. This method involves setting up the chairs in the conference room into two concentric circles; one small central circle consisting of five chairs, and a second larger outside circle where the rest of the discussion participants will sit as an audience (the number of seats in the audience can be as few as 15 or as many as 100, as needed). In a "closed" fishbowl format, five Ministers and stakeholders will be chosen from the discussion participants to begin the conversation by sitting in the seats in the central circle. A moderator will present a topic or question to be addressed by those in the central circle, while the outer circle observes. After 30 minutes, the discussion will be closed, and the audience will be allowed to express their reactions to the discussion for 5 to 7 minutes. After this time, a new group of five Ministers and stakeholders will be chosen. The process continues until the total allotted time has concluded or all relevant topics have been addressed.

28. This type of format can be adjusted to create an "open" fishbowl conversation, wherein one of the five chairs in the central circle is left open. Members of the audience in the outer circle can enter the conversation in the inner circle by seating themselves in the empty fifth chair. Once a new person joins the conversation by filling the empty seat, someone who was already participating in the conversation must voluntarily leave the discussion so that one seat in the inner circle always remains empty. The remainder of the organization of this version can occur as in the "closed" version.

29.   Additionally, the fishbowl conversation format may be turned into a pannelists' fishbowl. In this case, a traditional panel discussion would occur, but instead of a debriefing of the panel discussion with the audience, the members of the panel would take the seats within the fishbowl, where they would be able to speak with each other, in front of the audience, and express their responses to each other's' presentations.

30.   Another variation is a heterogeneous fishbowl, wherein the five seats in the inner circle would be occupied by one representative from each stakeholder group (1 Minister, 1 NGO representative, 1 IGO representative, 1 Business representative, and 1 educator or expert). The version is otherwise the same as the "closed" fishbowl, and could be useful as a means of bringing together many different viewpoints.

J.   Problem-solving poster presentation

31.   This option is a more informal "problem-solving poster presentation"-type of discussion. 4 to 6 representatives from the various stakeholder groups would be asked to prepare a poster or display that details research, specific case studies, or other real-life issues that are related to a topic, theme, or set of questions.

32.   The posters could be set up around a large conference room, and attendees would have 20 to 25 minutes to walk around the room, read the posters, and discuss the content with each other. After this time, each of the 4 to 6 representatives would have up to 7 minutes to present their research/case study/etc.

33.   Observers would then be free to discuss, ask questions, and present possible solutions to the representative for 5 to 10 minutes immediately following their presentation, after which time the next representative would discuss their display. The remaining time would be designated for an informal group conversation with thoughts and questions applicable to any of the presentations or displays, where a moderator would guide the discussion.

34.   The goal of this format would be to collectively provide the stakeholder representatives with potential solutions to the issues they raised in their presentations, as well as to agree as a group on general recommendations for avoiding related issues in the future, across stakeholder groups and member States.

K.   World Café

35.   A final option is the "World Café" method. In this scenario, those participants in the plenary meeting would split into 3 to 4 groups at the conclusion of the plenary session, and each group would participate in a thematic session. Each of the groups would have approximately 90 minutes to separately address a set of 3 to 4 key questions or topics in an informal, interactive way. The group discussions will make proposals how to deal with issues related to the topics and find solutions to the issues and questions at hand.

36.   A summary of each group's conclusions will be reported back to the plenary by a moderator for the final 30 minutes of the 2-hour session. A brief written summary of the total conclusions of all of the groups would also be submitted to the plenary for its review and use.

L.   Additional comments and suggestions

37.   Some of the specific EfE survey responses from member States regarding the interactive format for the Ministerial Conference included the following:

(a)   Slovenia suggested regional or sub-regional round tables or workshops in order to enable respective ministers to use their own language, or another language of the region that s/he can speak;

(b)   The Czech Republic was of the opinion that the EfE process would benefit from a more pronounced political/expert involvement;

(c)   The NGO BIOTICA suggested that NGOs be given a larger role in round table discussions;

(d)   Poland liked the idea of a "Question Time" format, with the caveat that due care should be given to organizational particulars with such a format.

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