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Economic Commission for Europe

Inland Transport Committee

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Item 16 (a) of the provisional agenda

Any other business: Issues relating to the servicing of meetings and availability of documents by the Committee and its subsidiary bodies

Overview of translation issues in relation to the work of the Committee

Revision

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The Inland Transport Committee (ITC), at its seventy-eighth session, had examined general translations issues. This document outlines the main concerns of ITC subsidiary bodies and identifies ways for their solution.

The Committee is invited to **review** this document and consider the recommendations **contained** therein.

I. Background

1. The Inland Transport Committee (ITC), at its seventy-eighth session, had discussed emerging topics under the general theme of translations issues that impact its work and that of the Committee and its subsidiary bodies, and the strategic issues they raise for ITC. The Committee had invited the Working Parties and Administrative Committees to prepare a strategic assessment of the issues and challenges on this topic (ECE/TRANS/254, para. 170).

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2. This document is based on experiences of the Working Parties and the Administrative Committees, and on previous discussions between the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Sustainable Transport Division and the Division for Conference Management (DCM) of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). On the basis of responses received, two main areas of concern were identified, namely translations in the three UNECE languages, and translations in other United Nations official languages. This latter is being dealt with in document ECE/TRANS/2017/29.

II. Translations in the three UNECE languages (English, French, Russian)

A. Translations associated with pre-session documents

3. The main concern related to translations of pre-session documents is that on various occasions UNECE documents were not issued in the required languages in a timely manner, even though the vast majority of pre-session documents are submitted on time. ECE rate of timely submission exceeds the 90 per cent benchmark stipulated in A/RES/70/9 of 25 November 2015 and the Secretary-General's directives. According to the rules adopted by the General Assembly for the control and limitation of documents, priority is assigned to timely submitted slotted pre-session documents which are within the established word limit. As a general rule, pre-session documents have to be submitted at the latest 10 weeks before the opening of the session, so that documents may be processed within four weeks and issued six weeks in advance in accordance with rule 3 of the UNECE Rules of procedure ('10-4-6' pattern - see also General Assembly resolution 47/202). The length of pre-session documents should not exceed the established word limit which is 8,500 words for documents originating in the Secretariat and 10,700 for non-Secretariat documents as per GA Resolution A/Res/52/214B.

4. These delays have become a source of criticism, because they have hindered the proceedings of sessions, thus also leading to loss of staff time and resources for the Secretariat and member States alike. Furthermore, due to delays in the availability of translation of amendment to various regulations, there are also delays in making them mandatory.

5. However, respondents have also noted improvements since the Committee invited the preparation of this document. Specifically, the rate of timely issuance by DCM in 2015 was only 54 per cent, but has improved significantly in 2016 with an issuance compliance rate of 95 per cent of all timely submitted pre session documents

for the period of 1 October to 31 December 2016.

6. Furthermore, DCM encourages to submit documents as soon as they are ready (referred to as "early submission") and to make arrangements for late slotting of documents that cannot meet the 10-4-6 pattern due to force majeure reasons restricted to situations that are truly beyond the control of the secretariat, with the understanding that the processing time remains four weeks and, henceforth, the issuance date will be less than six weeks before the consideration.

Causes identified by DCM

7. The following causes have been identified as the sources of some delays:
- Inadequate resources for ever-increasing workload: high volumes of slotted pre-session documents for the Sustainable Transport Division in particular. For example, for 2016, ECE pre-session documents represent 50 % of all slotted submissions.

- Some documents relating to legal instruments are submitted as pre-session documents, notably those related to vehicle regulations and often far exceed the established 8,500 word limit. Thus, they do not lend themselves to processing within four weeks. The problem is exacerbated in cases of new regulations (i.e. when there are no portions of previously translated text).
- The legal nature of these documents requires that their processing be assigned to in-house translators who have the required expertise to produce texts in accordance with the highest translation standards. This means that these jobs cannot be outsourced or shared with other duty stations, as translators do not have the required exposure to the subject matter.
- Concentration of submissions during the last quarter of the year: for the year 2016, for instance, a total of 109 sessions which include official documentation were scheduled for UNECE, 56 sessions of which were scheduled between September and December.

8. It should also be borne in mind that, in accordance with the rules of the General Assembly, the issuance of documents is subject to the rule of simultaneous distribution, i.e. a document is made available only once it is available in all official languages. As a consequence, any staff resource problem in a single language service has direct consequences on the timely issuance of all other versions. This has recently been the case for the French language service.

B. Translations associated with post-session documents

9. The main issue with the processing of translations of post-session documents is that they are not prioritized given the absence of a General Assembly resolution determining that post-session documents be issued within a given time frame.

10. While it is recommended that these reports be submitted for processing two weeks after the closure of the session and should not exceed 10,700 words, there is no formal processing time frame and in most cases they are processed in more than 28 days.

11. In order to overcome the problems and to address the issue of ensuring that post-session documents are available when they are being considered, DCM has suggested to ECE to flag the date during the forecasting stage so that processing sections can be notified and these requests can be taken into consideration.

III. Translations in non-UNECE United Nations official languages

12. There are two main issues related to the translation in non-UNECE United Nations official languages. The first is that the ITC and its Working Parties are responsible for administering a number of United Nations transport agreements the authentic texts of which are also in non-UNECE United Nations official languages. Amendments or new annexes to these agreements may be notified to Contracting Parties for acceptance only when they are made available in all languages of the authentic text of the agreement. As a consequence, the timely notification of amendments is highly dependent on the availability of translations.

13. The second issue is that the availability of documents relevant for Global Conventions in non-ECE official languages. This question is discussed in ECE/TRANS/2017/29.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

14. Delays in the issuance of pre-session and post-session documents impact the image of the United Nations and its reputation among Member States. In the case of legal functions, they also have serious impacts at the level of the economy and industry, insofar as they are associated with delays in the adoption/implementation of new and amended legal texts.

15. Based on the experiences of the Working Parties and the Administrative Committees, improvements have been reported in the timely issuance of pre-session slotted documents, a reflection of increased efficiency and new methods deployed by DCM. In light of these developments, the Committee may wish to **review** the situation vis-a-vis translations of pre-session documents at its next annual session.

16. With post-session documents, there are still translation-related issues that inhibit the ability and performance of the secretariat to deliver key outputs in a timely way, even when these are considered as inputs for subsequent intergovernmental meetings. In light of this situation, the Committee may wish to **request** its member States to raise the issue at the level of the General Assembly and to propose rules for the faster issuance of post-session documentation.
