

REPORT

Review of expanded meeting modalities at the United Nations Office at Geneva

September 2023

United Nations Office at Geneva
Division of Administration

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION
2. EXPANDED MEETING MODALITIES
 - 2.1. Global trends
 - 2.2. The use of expanded meeting modalities at the UN in Geneva
 - 2.3. The impact of expanded meeting modalities
 - 2.4. Best practices, challenges and lessons learnt
 - 2.5. Mandates
 - 2.6. Budgets
 - 2.7. SWOT analysis
3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ANNEXES

List of interviewees

Executive summary

Bringing people together in multilateral negotiation is a key feature and strength of international Geneva. Providing the best possible conditions for multilateral meetings makes a strong contribution to fulfilling the mandates of the UN. This study has sought to scan the latest trends in the swiftly evolving post-COVID-19 pandemic environment, gauge client and user needs and perspectives, and distill strategies to ensure Geneva remains a hub for modern conferencing.

Conference organization post-COVID-19 at UNOG is influenced by a number of global trends, such as the ease and frequency with which remote meetings are now organized in the work context. Increasing travel costs are paired with pressures on travel budgets, and there is a general hope that hybrid meetings can help to sustain a lower environmental footprint by reducing global air travel.

The number of meetings that took place in Geneva in 2022 (at the Palais des Nations and Palais Wilson) was at 60% of the 2019 level. Some meetings that previously required only a room and no conference services, may have permanently moved online or shifted to other meeting spaces outside of the conferencing pool of rooms, while those requiring conferencing service support, especially the ones with interpretation, have remained in the statistics. Another factor at play is the closure of some conference rooms for renovation under the Strategic Heritage Plan (SHP). Some meetings, requiring less servicing, may have permanently moved online, while especially the ones with interpretation have remained in the UNOG calendar. The lower number of meetings can in part be explained by the lack of room capacity due to SHP renovations.

As the Pattern of Conferences report of the Secretary-General shows, Geneva had the highest share of hybrid meetings in 2021 and 2022 compared to New York, Vienna, and Nairobi. New York is the only location with universal permanent representation from the Member States and thus less pressure to accommodate remote participation. The nature of meetings in Geneva is more diverse with many technical meetings taking place, many of them less political than the ones in New York. In addition, civil society participation is an inherent part of meetings, contributing additional views and insight to the discussion, especially in the human rights sphere, and civil society participation particularly benefits from hybrid meeting modalities.

Even if not all remote participants in hybrid meetings had actually travelled to Geneva without a remote participation option, the potential savings from travel costs are still enormous. However, the savings made for travel expenses are almost completely on the side of participants, while the expenses for hybrid modalities are incurred fully on the side of conference organizers and there is no direct transfer of funds.

For meetings of one to five days, the average savings in travel expenses of one or two participants would generally be enough to cover the cost of Webex or Webcasting and the savings of two to three participants not travelling could cover the costs of hybrid meetings with RSI platforms for regular budget (RB) or extra-budgetary (XB) meetings. In 2022, nearly 120 thousand online participants joined UNOG meetings with interpretation from outside Switzerland. This remote participation is estimated to be equivalent to 277 million USD for travel, based on average prices of tickets to Geneva and back, issued through UNOG travel and one day of DSA. This amount is 220 times the amount paid for hybrid RSI meetings that year (1'254'001 USD). In 2023, 37 thousand online participants in meetings with interpretation using RSI platforms from outside Switzerland might have saved an estimated 85 million USD for travel (pro-rated figures for January to September 2023). The savings are 92 times the amount

paid for hybrid services using RSI platforms in 2023 (924'943 USD, pro-rated, based on figures from January to August 2023). In addition, more than 21 thousand remote participants on Webex could generate savings as high as 50 million USD or 190 times the amount spent on providing Webex-related services (260'694 USD prorated figures for 2023).

Conference organizers and participants alike attach very high importance to the possibility of organizing hybrid meetings, rating it above an average of 8 on a scale of 10 with 10 being “extremely important”. Half of conference organizers and participants rated the possibility of holding hybrid meetings as “extremely important” (10 out of 10). Questions about strengths and weaknesses of a fully in-person scenario vs. hybrid possibilities show that few respondents are strongly in favour of the fully in-person scenario while many make passionate statements in favour of hybrid modalities, with quite a number of them suggesting that UN Geneva would seem “outdated” and possibly become irrelevant as a conference hub, if it returned to organizing only in-person events. Most respondents are in favour of an approach that accommodates in-person and virtual participation, allowing to choose the right meeting format for every occasion. They acknowledge that there are many meetings which benefit from in-person presence (such as negotiations), while others might be suited to hybrid or virtual formats (e. g. expert meetings or training courses). The interviews suggest that meeting organizers and participants prefer in-person participation to nurture human connections and have informal conversations on the side, but there may be one or several experts or high-level participants from capital who may need to connect remotely, often at short notice. Making this possible enhances the inclusiveness of the meeting, adding to the richness of the debate through a larger variety of opinions. Civil society has been particularly vocal about their demand to keep hybrid options, including in an open letter to the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly, and the President of the Human Rights Council.

The shortening of hybrid meetings with interpretation in cases of remote interventions longer than 30 minutes remains an issue for many meeting organizers and participants, as it reduces multilingual meeting time by one-third, often to the detriment of questions and discussion and leading to a reorganization of the programme that impedes the logical flow of the proceedings. Accommodating distant time zones remains an issue as the timing offered for conferences at UNOG is relatively rigid.

The study shows that organizing hybrid events is more complex than in-person meetings, requiring more coordination between the additional services involved. This complexity is at present difficult to navigate for clients. With gMeets, Indico.UN and the Single Point of Entry (SPOE) platform on iSeek, clients have to fill in different forms and at the backend, service providers have different levels of access to information. Clients would prefer being able to choose their meeting platform rather than being assigned Webex and Zoom, depending on whether or not interpretation is used. Conference organizers agree that providing good technical support (including technical moderation) and rapid troubleshooting are key for the successful implementation of hybrid meetings and should cover all clients, including NGOs.

Clients feel that it would be helpful to have an overarching mandate by the General Assembly (GA) in place to provide a legal framework for their meetings that clarifies issues, such as the status of a meeting, remote decision-making modalities, voting procedures, authentication of remote participants, the handling of closed and private meetings, and data protection. ITU and UNAIDS have made notable advances in creating mandates and rules of procedure for expanded meeting modalities, albeit (up to

now) without any financial implications. The Human Rights Council and the Human Rights Treaty Bodies have obtained mandates for webcasting which include financial attributions.

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that clients would like to organize more meetings with remote options, if they were available to them without additional charges - especially for RB meetings. Offering all regular budget meetings with and without interpretation through platforms allowing remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI), such as Zoom, would cost approximately 6 million USD (based on pro-rated 2023 figures for the meeting numbers). If all regular budget meetings currently offered with interpretation were to be offered through RSI platforms, this would cost about 2.3 million USD. The cost of servicing all XB meetings through RSI platforms would be approximately 770K USD (based on pro-rated 2023 meeting numbers, noting that the quantity of XB meetings might be quite volatile from year to year). In practice, it is unlikely that all meetings would require remote participation; survey participants indicate the need of remote modalities for about 58% of all meetings.

From the perspective of crisis preparedness, hybrid capacities should be maintained. Existing hardware and software have to be used in order to be kept up to date and functioning. This practice would contribute to providing business continuity in times of room shortages related to the ongoing renovations under the Strategic Heritage Plan or in cases of building closures that may become necessary in response to the electricity crisis.

1. Introduction

Background and context

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid and virtual conferencing was offered to clients at UN Geneva as a business continuity measure. Meeting and conference rooms were equipped to host meetings with remote participation, including with remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI), and temporary staff was employed to service such meetings.

As business continuity measures have expired at the end of June 2023, the question arose how meetings would be conducted in the future, given the absence of a formal General Assembly mandate for expanded meeting modalities and related budgets.

This study takes a cross-UNOG approach and seeks to ensure that the UN in Geneva is well-equipped to seamlessly fulfil its mandate as a major multilateral conference-provider, being fit for the future of conferencing and well-prepared to respond to the evolving needs of its clients, meeting participants and other stakeholders. The assessment reacts to requests received by Member States and civil society. It contributes to maintaining business continuity in light of the limitations imposed by the ongoing SHP renovations and in a generally unpredictable environment. As such, it also contributes to UNOG's enterprise risk management.

This study is embedded in the legislative framework applicable to UN conferences, as adopted by Member States. It builds upon work carried out under the [Conferencing Today & Tomorrow – 2](#) initiative which took stock of the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring synergies and efficiencies for the “Next Normal” post-COVID-19.

This assessment was carried out at UNOG between July and September 2023 to reflect the experience in Geneva from the perspective of Member States and delegations, substantive secretariats, service providers and participants.

Objectives

UN Geneva seeks to be a hub of modern conferencing to provide the best possible conditions for Member States, conference secretariats and other stakeholders to convene, discuss and negotiate to resolve issues that are most vital to the planet and its people and to agree on strategies to move forward in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This assessment aims to:

- Establish the anticipated needs of conference and meeting organizers and participants in extended meeting modalities (in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings);
- Identify legal, financial and technical requirements (e. g. mandates and budgets); and
- Record best practices, challenges and lessons learnt.

Methodology

This assessment is based on four main data sources:

- (i) A desk review of relevant strategic documents and other written materials
- (ii) Quantitative data and statistics
- (iii) An online survey to meeting organizers and participants, and
- (iv) Interviews and focus group discussions.

The survey was open from 31 July to 15 September 2023 and resulted in 165 responses, of which 46 were from conference organizers and 90 from conference participants, while 24 identified as “others”. Survey participants included representative of 28 UN Member States, including Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Monaco, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Samoa, Switzerland, Togo, Tunisia, Türkiye, Viet Nam, and the U.S., as well as the Delegation of the EU. It also included at least 18 NGOs, as well as other international organizations. Not all survey participants chose to reveal their affiliation, anonymous responses were equally acceptable. More than 50 individuals were reached through interviews and focus group discussions.

Definitions

The following terms and definitions apply for the purpose of this assessment:

Expanded meeting modalities

Expanded meeting modalities refer to the diversification of meeting formats beyond traditional in-person conferences at the UN in Geneva. They involve incorporating additional options, such as virtual or hybrid meetings (a combination of in-person and virtual elements), webcasting (remote observation), pre-recorded video messages or alternative formats to accommodate the needs and preferences of conference organizers and participants.

Virtual meetings

Virtual meetings involve the use of communication technologies to facilitate remote participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increasing use of virtual meetings via video conferencing platforms and collaboration tools to bring participants from different locations together. Virtual meetings enable real-time interactions, presentations, and discussions, making it possible for participants to engage without the need for physical travel.

Hybrid meetings

Hybrid meetings refer to a meeting modality that combines both in-person and virtual elements, allowing participants to join remotely from different locations through virtual platforms and video conferencing technology. They allow for in-person interactions and networking opportunities for those physically present, while providing the flexibility for participants to attend online. Hybrid meetings could be run with

or without interpretation. At UN meetings, interpretation is done from an interpretation booth in the conference room where the in-person participants are located.

2. Expanded meeting modalities

2.1 Global trends

Conference organization at UNOG is influenced by global contextual trends which will be presented in this chapter.

Meeting modalities in the workplace

Research analyzing metadata from Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Webex on meetings in ten large global organizations¹, shows how meeting habits have been changing in corporate workplaces since the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that there were on average 60% more remote meetings per employee in 2022 compared to 2020 (an increase from five to eight meetings per week). At the same time, remote meetings had become shorter, decreasing from 43 to 33 minutes on average during those two years. There was a marked increase in one-on-one meetings - in 2020, 17% of meetings were one-on-one and in 2022 this share had increased to 42%. One-on-one meetings have become more spontaneous: In 2020, only 17% of one-on-one meetings were unscheduled, but in 2022, 66% of one-on-one meetings were unscheduled. For the authors, these data suggests that remote interactions are shifting to more closely mirror in-person interactions, as remote employees compensate for the loss of in-person interactions by increasingly having impromptu meetings remotely.

The ease with which online meetings can be organized in the work environment has created habits and expectations which extend into the realm of conferences and larger meetings in the UN context. The realities lived in workplaces around the world have created a sense of normality and entitlement among many, which leads to the expectation that official meetings can also be organized with virtual participation as spontaneously and seamlessly. It has also led to a trend whereby many bodies with meetings in the UN calendars have added a significant number of online meetings in between formal meetings to discuss ongoing work, as survey participants remarked.

Trends in the event industry

The Global Exhibition Barometer of the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, presented in July 2023², contains several noteworthy observations:

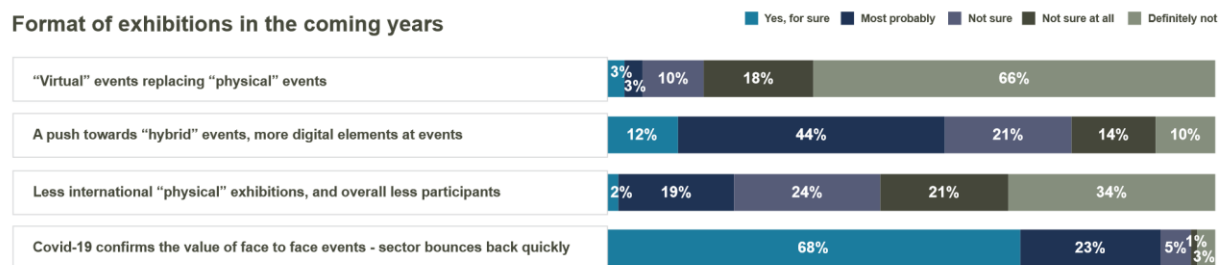
- Globally, revenues from exhibitions for 2022 and 2023 represent 78% and 97% of the 2019 levels respectively, indicating a progressive full recovery.

¹ <https://hbr.org/2022/12/no-remote-employees-arent-becoming-less-engaged>.

² https://www.ufi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/31st_UFI_Global_Barometer_July_2023.pdf.

- The impact of digitalization and competition with other media are ranked among the top most important business issues while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the business is now considered one of the least pressing issues.
- Around 45% of respondents anticipate that digitalization will significantly influence business development; 64% of respondents have added digital products or services (such as apps, digital advertising and digital signage) to their existing exhibition offerings. This is especially the case in Europe (67%).
- 91% of respondents (compared to 87% a year ago and 78% two years ago) agree that “COVID-19 confirms the value of face-to-face events”.
- Only 21% (compared to 31% and 46% previously) believe there will be fewer international ‘physical’ exhibitions and, overall, fewer participants
- 56% (compared to 61% and 76% previously) believe there is a push towards hybrid events and more digital elements at events
- Only 6% (compared to 6% and 11% previously) agree that virtual events are replacing physical events.

Format of exhibitions in the coming years



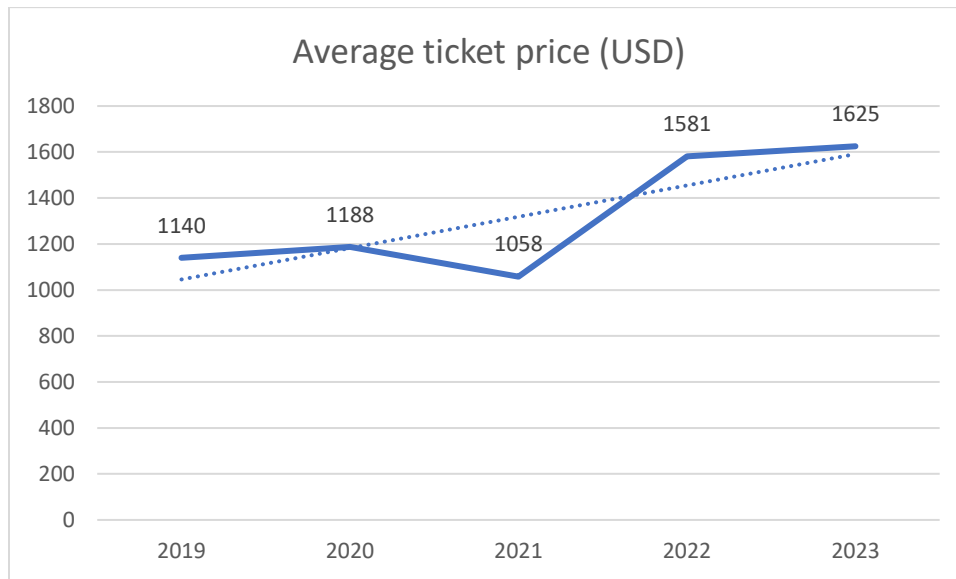
Global Exhibition Barometer, Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (July 2023)

Anecdotal evidence offered by a major commercial conference centre in Geneva confirms a strong urge by participants to come back to conferences in person. It observes an estimated 20-30% increase in attendance at their congresses. The impression is that conference participants are catching up with opportunities lost during COVID, some event organizers have started organizing two annual events where before COVID there had only been one, to cater for the appetite in networking and meeting “real” people at events. Clients occasionally ask to connect a speaker remotely, which can be done at a relatively low cost. In such cases, outside companies are engaged to handle the technical part. More sophisticated hybrid events are rarely requested by clients as they entail relatively high costs.

Travel costs and budgets

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of travel has increased, potentially influencing decisions with regard to in-person attendance at conferences and meetings. At the UN in Geneva, the average air ticket price across all approved trips was 1'140 USD in 2019, compared to 1'581 USD in 2022 and 1'625 USD in 2023 (as of September 2023).³ This represents a 43% increase from 2019 to 2023.

³ The years 2019 and 2022 are considered to represent pre- and post-COVID figures; the numbers for 2020 and 2021 are more indicative, as they are calculated on the basis of much less official travel.



General travel statistics at UNOG, NB: 2023 figures are as of end of September 2023

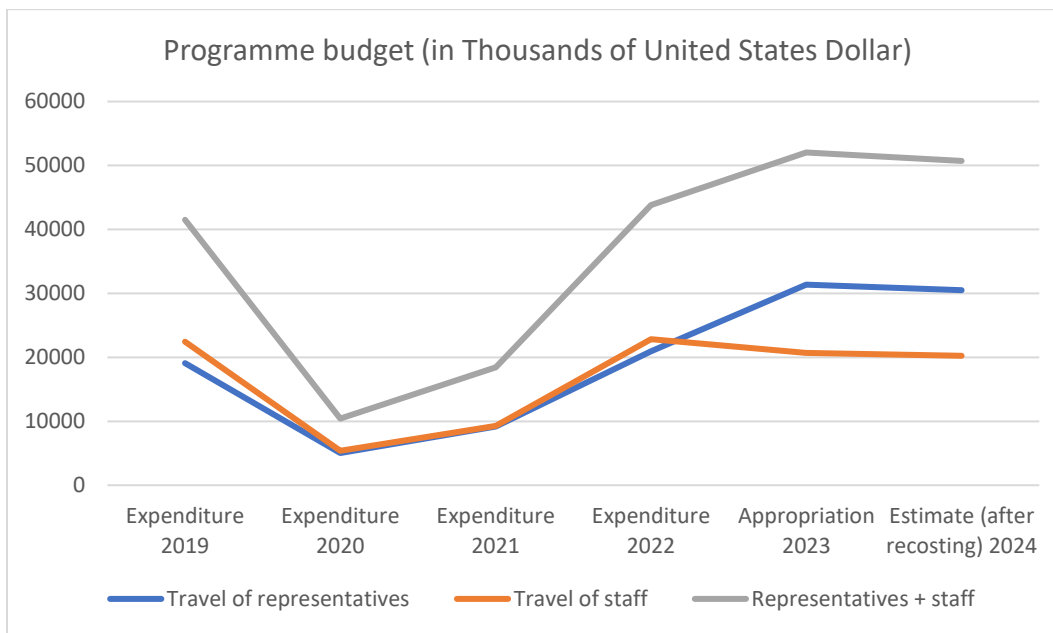
Average prices for inbound flights (e. g. for meeting participants attending conferences in Geneva) tended to be even higher, 1'947 USD in 2022 and 1'916 USD in 2023 (January to September 2023).

While prices for air travel may have increased, average daily rates for accommodation in the Lake Geneva region are largely back to pre-COVID levels. Accommodation occupancy rates appear to be still slightly lower than in the pre-COVID year 2019 (-8%), indicating somewhat reduced travel.

Increased ticket prices have had an impact on travel budgets: The respective Proposed programme budgets before and after COVID⁴ indicate a budget increase to 122% with regard to travel expenses for representative and staff⁵ combined, from 2019 (expenses) to 2024 (estimates after recosting). Significantly more funds are being set aside to ensure travel of representatives - a 160% increase comparing 2019 expenditures with 2024 estimates. At the same time, fewer funds are being allocated for staff travel (90% of the 2019 level in 2024). The inversion of the ratio of expenses for travel of representatives compared to staff appears to be a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ Proposed programme budgets for 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, A/75/6 (Introduction), A/76/6 (Introduction), A/77/6 (Introduction), A/78/6 (Introduction).

⁵ Travel expenses for representative are defined as transportation costs and/or daily subsistence allowance of representatives of intergovernmental bodies and electoral observers. Travel expenses for staff are defined as transportation costs of staff members to carry out missions in support of the implementation of mandates.



These budget trends seem to be in line with feedback received in the interviews held for this study, namely that delegates are keen to be back in meetings in person. At the same time, travel for staff is looked at more selectively and an increased share of trainings and webinars is offered online. Reduced travel budgets for staff add to the pressure to consider hybrid alternatives to participate in meetings.

Interestingly, the Proposed programme budget for 2024 of relevance to the top traveler OHCHR⁶, reiterates a commitment to remote participation in meetings across the document for different reasons, including in connection with travel expenses, such as this example illustrates:

“Subprogramme 1, Human rights mainstreaming, right to development, and research and analysis. A decrease of \$20,300 under grants and contributions is due to a reduction in the travel of witnesses, enabled by an increase in remote interviews, and an increase in remote consultations in lieu of in-person interactions;” (A/78/6 (Sect. 24), paragraph 24.120 (b), p. 62).

Many delegations have noted that, after the remote access option has become more widespread, authorization for travel has become more difficult to obtain.

2.2 The use of expanded meeting modalities at the UN in Geneva

Expanded meeting modalities in numbers

Meeting rooms have progressively been equipped so that at the time of writing, a majority of rooms accommodate expanded meeting modalities, including rooms III, V, VII, VIII, IX, the new Press Room, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI, XXVII and Tempus at the Palais des Nations and the Ground Floor and First Floor conference rooms at Palais Wilson (for Human Rights Treaty Bodies only).

⁶ Part VI Human rights and humanitarian affairs, Section 24 Human rights, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/121/93/pdf/N2312193.pdf?OpenElement>.

Below is an overview of meetings serviced by UNOG between 2019 and 2023, including in hybrid and virtual mode.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023**
Total Meetings*	12'371	4'274	5'298	7'979	4'797
In-person	12'371	2'915	2'382	4'474	3'188
Hybrid	0***	893	2'480	3'402	1'587
Virtual	0***	466	436	103	22
% with interpretation	26%	23%	41%	39%	38%
# with interpretation	3'249	983	2'177	3'136	1'836
% virtual/hybrid meetings held with interpretation	0%***	57%	83%	70%	45%

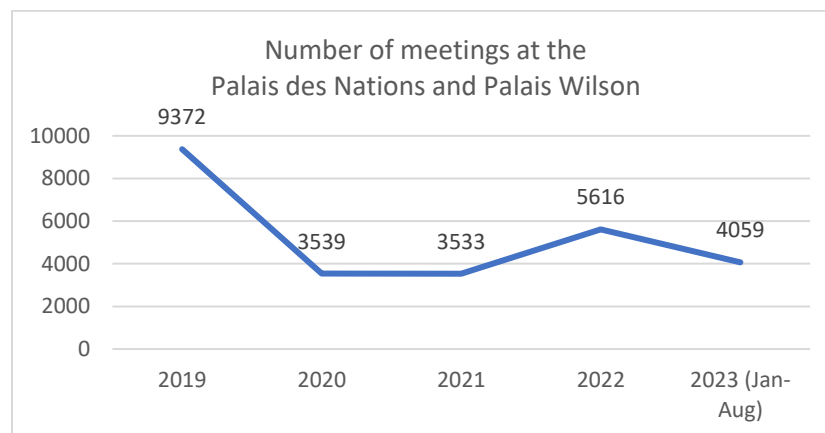
Evaluation, Analysis and Monitoring Section (EAMS), UNOG

* Meetings are counted in blocks of up to 3 hours

** 2023 figures are provisional and through till the end of August.

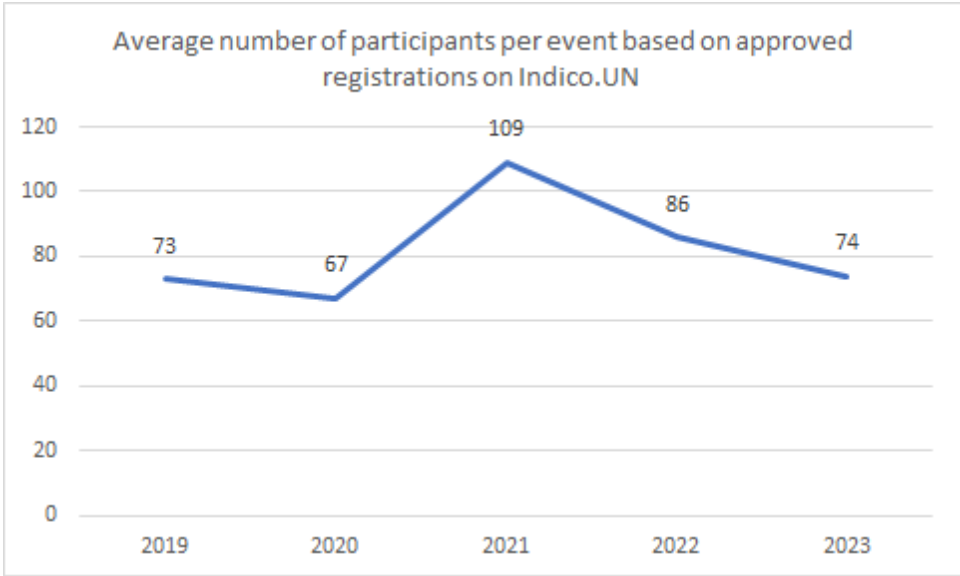
***Figures on hybrid and virtual meetings are likely recorded as 0 in 2019 because such meeting modalities were not recorded in gMeets at the time. Yet, Webex meetings were supported prior to 2019. UNOG's ICTS recorded 1,417 hybrid meetings in 2019 and 1,455 in 2020, numbers for the following years match the below table. It is possible that hybrid and virtual meetings became better integrated into gMeets with COVID and/or that less meetings with remote participation were supported by ICTS outside gMeets because users became more autonomous in managing expanded meeting modalities.

Based on the table above, meetings in 2022 reached 64% of the pre-COVID 2019 level. These figures include meetings serviced away from Geneva. A similar trend appears when looking at meetings held in Geneva only (60% of the 2019 level).



In part, the lower number of meetings today is related to reduced room capacities due to ongoing renovations (19 conference rooms are currently available, while another 19 are not). In addition, it can be assumed that some pre-COVID meetings have been transferred online permanently. These might be expert meetings that never required much servicing and can easily be organized online without any technical assistance. Looking at meetings with interpretation, they almost reached pre-COVID numbers in 2022, making for a higher share of overall meetings. This suggests that meetings requiring interpretation have tended to stay with UNOG.

The average numbers of participants per event based on approved Indico.UN registrations seem to suggest that 2023 is back to pre-COVID levels (cf. table below). However, Indico.UN numbers do not provide a complete record as not all meetings and events are managed through this system (in 2022, only 1089 events appear) and online participants are not consistently recorded in Indico.UN.



The average number of remote participants in hybrid meetings with interpretation (i. e. on RSI platforms) was 72 in 2022, reaching a total of 156'003 remote participants. The average number for 2023 (January to September 2023) is 55 remote participants per meeting, with a total of 49'641 remote participants across all hybrid meetings with interpretation. A more detailed breakdown for 2023 can be found in the table below (as provided by UNOG's Information and Communication Technology Service, ICTS):

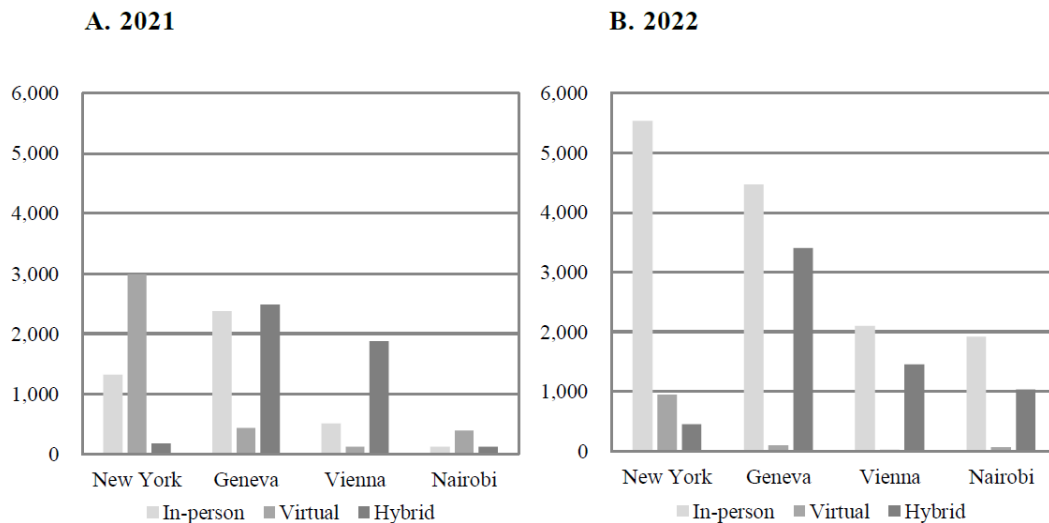
Average number of remote participants in hybrid meetings with interpretation:

Entity	1 January - 30 June	1 July - 31 September
All entities	54	44
Human Rights Council	77	60
Universal Periodic Review (UPR)	61	N/A
Treaty Bodies	49	(Only virtual meetings without interpretation)
UNECE	101	127

In addition, there were 1'252 meetings with 30'064 remote participants on Webex, with 24 participants per meeting on average (January to September 2023).⁷

As the Pattern of Conferences Report of the Secretary-General ([A/78/96](#)) illustrates, with 44% Geneva has the highest share of hybrid and virtual meetings compared to New York (20%), Nairobi (36%) and Vienna (41%).

Figure II
Formats of meetings held at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, 2021 and 2022



[A/78/96](#), *Pattern of conferences. Report of the Secretary-General, p. 4.*

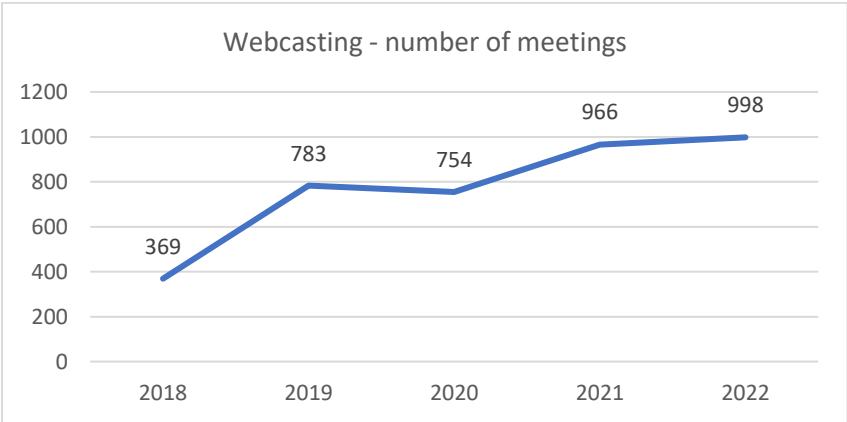
The figures above include meetings serviced by UNOG outside Geneva. When looking at the meetings serviced by UNOG within Geneva, the share of hybrid and virtual meetings goes up to 62%: In 2022, 5'616 meetings were serviced within Geneva, 3'390 of them in hybrid and 103 in virtual mode. In 2023 (January-August), the share of hybrid meetings went down to 39% (4'059 meetings have been serviced at the duty station, of which 1'589 in hybrid and 11 in virtual mode). The decreasing share of hybrid modalities in 2023 is a consequence of the charges introduced for such modalities in 2022.

In parallel to interactive hybrid events, there has been a trend to offering meetings with the possibility of remote observation. Some meeting organizers choose to offer meetings through hybrid meeting platforms without giving remote participants active speaking rights. Through webcasting meetings are streamed live on the [UN Web TV site](#) and available for on-demand viewing thereafter. Public meetings organized or co-sponsored by UN entities can be webcast, but the service is not offered for meetings organized by Member States or NGOs without the sponsorship of a UN entity. The number of meetings webcast at UNOG has massively increased – by 270% between 2018 and 2022. The general upwards trend has been quite stable, with a jump before COVID, related to the mandate established for Human Rights Treaty Bodies around 2019, and another one related to COVID. The mandate for the HRC was established in 2022 (previously, HRC webcasting had been paid for from XB funds for about a decade). At the time of writing, about half of the webcast meetings cover the Human Rights Council (HRC) regular

⁷ Figures for remote participants on Webex are not available for the full year of 2022.

session and the Human Rights Treaty Bodies, both of which are covered by a GA mandate. The trend that HRC sessions have become longer has contributed to the upwards trend in hours of webcasting provided at UNOG (a resolution in 2022 recognized that the HRC meets 14 weeks per year with full resources for webcasting). The Human Rights Treaty Bodies have also requested five extra weeks of meetings for 2024, and they might ask for more for 2025. XB requests for webcasting are related to disarmament meetings, UNECE, the International Law Commission and OCHA. At present, discussions are underway to create a new webcasting mandate for the Open-Ended Working Group on Space Threats starting in 2024 (meetings have been webcast with XB funds over the past few years). It has been possible to accommodate the increased demand for webcasting as more rooms have been equipped in the course of the recent renovations.

Number of meetings webcast out of Geneva per year (mostly 3-hour meetings):



The epicenter of webcasting at the UN is New York, with coverage of the General Assembly, the Security Council and many other meetings. Apart from New York Headquarters and UNOG, the ILO in Geneva, the International Court of Justice in the Hague and FAO in Rome are also represented on the platform. UN Vienna has started webcasting on UN Web TV this year (mainly meetings of a committee working on a future treaty on cybercrime) and Nairobi is exploring the establishment of a multimedia AV hub. While previously very few duty stations had local facilities to provide webcasting, by now nearly all headquarters’ duty stations have established some type of facility.

Listen Live is another (currently less well-known) option to follow discussions in a meeting remotely through live streaming, which is available online for all public meetings. The below table provides an overview of how many people have clicked on *Listen Live* links over the past months. It gives an indication of how much this service is being used (however, the figures should not be used at face value, as one participant might click through the various languages of a meeting, producing a “hit” every time).

Month 2023	Number of hits
04	2'382
05	4'358
06	3'789
07	973
08	788
09	503
Grand Total	12'793

If promoted more, *Listen Live* might become an interesting alternative for remote observation for meetings without a budget to pay for fully hybrid meetings or webcasts.

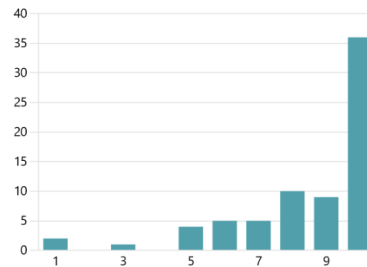
Client and user expectations

The survey carried out for this assessment showed that conference organizers attach a very high importance to the possibility of offering expanded meeting modalities – 50% rated this as extremely important (10 on a scale from 1 to 10); 76% rated this issue between 8 and 10, the average rating was 8.49.

2. How important is it for you to be able to offer your meetings with expanded meeting modalities such as hybrid or virtual meetings, webcasting, using pre-recorded video messages, etc.? On a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important)

[More Details](#) [Insights](#)

8.49
Average Rating



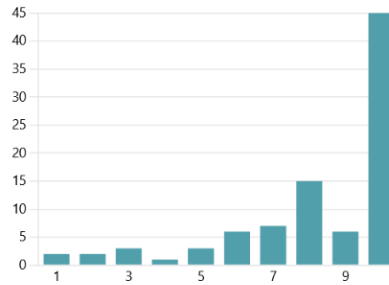
Conference participants showed similar preferences: 50% rated the possibility of participating in meetings in hybrid or virtual format as extremely important (10 on a scale from 1 to 10); 72% chose a score between 8 and 10 for this question.

27. In the coming two years, how important is it for you to be able to participate in meetings online? On a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important)

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

8.26
Average Rating



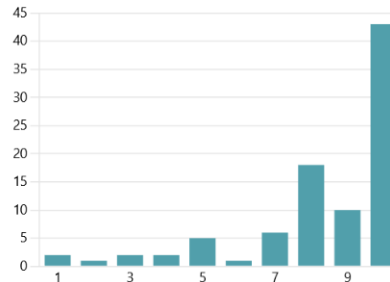
Participants attached equally high importance to being able to participate in meetings in person; 48% chose 10 (“extremely important”); 78% of respondents rated the importance of in-person participation between 8 and 10.

26. In the coming two years, how important is it for you to be able to participate in meetings in person? On a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important)

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

8.39
Average Rating



Interestingly, of the 43 meeting participants voting 10 for the importance of in-person meetings, more than half (22) also voted 10 for the importance of hybrid meetings. Of the 43 attaching extreme importance to in-person meetings, only 8 attached an importance lower than 5 to holding hybrid meetings. These figures confirm a trend that is confirmed in other parts of the survey (e. g. the SWOT analysis), namely that while there is one (larger) camp generally preferring hybrid formats and another (very small) camp in favour of only in-person formats, the majority wants to be able to choose the right format for their respective context which might sometimes be in-person and sometimes hybrid.

Survey results show a balanced view of how many meetings organizers plan in person vs. in hybrid mode – 42% of meeting organizers expect to be holding more than half of their meetings fully in-person while 47% expect more than half of their meetings in hybrid mode. This is another confirmation that in-person vs. hybrid is not an either-or question but that meeting organizers wish to use the whole array of possible formats depending on the purpose and context of a meeting.

3. In the coming two years, what share of your meetings do you expect to be organizing in traditional fully in-person format?

[More Details](#)

0 %	5
Up to 25%	18
Up to 50%	18
Up to 75%	18
Up to 100%	12



4. In the coming two years, what share of your meetings do you expect to be organizing with expanded meeting modalities, such as remote participation or remote observation?

[More Details](#)

0 %	3
Up to 25%	20
Up to 50%	15
Up to 75%	17
Up to 100%	16



As the personal interviews showed, organizers and participants like to go back to meeting in person. Especially for political discussions and negotiations, delegates want to be physically in the room. However, there are a few reasons that justify remote participation:

- Experts or high-level participants from capital who prefer not to travel for a 10-minute intervention or for participation in a 1-hour session
- Human rights defenders may be banned from leaving their countries, witnesses having to fear reprisals
- The need to connect people from war zones, failed states or refugee camps
- A last-minute impediment (e. g. breaking a leg).

In general, substantive bodies do not seek to offer a whole session or conference in hybrid format, but when the need arises, participants have the inherent expectation to be able to connect online to make their statement. There is a sense of entitlement, simply because in the daily working routine remote connections are easily and frequently established. Given that hybrid settings also generate a number of complications, such as how to manage the speakers' list or voting procedures and the shortened length of sessions with interpretation if remote speakers talk for more than 30 minutes, a number of conference organizers have also chosen to offer remote connections, but if participants wanted to speak or vote, they had to be in the room.

Civil society has been particularly vocal in demanding the continuation of hybrid meetings allowing remote interventions. In 2022, a [survey](#) released by HRCNet on the future of civil society participation at the Human Rights Council showed that hybrid modalities, combining possibilities for in-person interaction with remote connection, made the Council more accessible and overall "better" for the people on the

ground.⁸ In their open letter of 7 June 2023 addressed to the UN Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly, and the President of the Human Rights Council, 40 civil society organizations requested that the hybrid modalities of participation become a permanent tool for engagement of civil society organizations.⁹ NGOs often find that travelling to Geneva is beyond their means. As sessions of the HRC are getting longer, they are unable to afford staying in Geneva throughout and may choose to attend some part and follow the remainder of the session remotely. Remote participation is also an advantage for speakers who are barred from leaving the country, face visa issues or potential reprisals. Smaller local NGOs can be heard directly instead of them having to go through larger Europe-based NGOs and networks. UN staff working on human rights have confirmed that NGO participation through hybrid formats is critical to their work.

The service catalogue

Looking into the services that conference organizers plan to be requesting, responses were well spread across the options provided. The top five services for which a need was expressed were:

- Online meeting platforms, e. g. Zoom, Webex etc., incl. preparation and testing, execution and monitoring
- Interpretation for hybrid meetings (connected to a meeting room)
- Playing pre-recorded video statements during a virtual or hybrid meeting (e. g. on Zoom or Webex)
- Webcasting (streaming to the UN Web TV platform for remote observation)
- Recordings from the platform (e. g. Zoom or Webex) of hybrid and virtual meetings

Overall, the choices show that clients are likely to use standard options and that they are much less likely to request human captioning or suggest services that are not yet listed on the service menu. Offering too many options that clients may not fully understand may tend to overwhelm them. As a consequence, some clients suggested the introduction of meeting packages, to simplify the choices and reduce complexity on all sides. Occasional requests for additional and more sophisticated services could be handled on an ad hoc basis, and only if they can be accommodated. Such an approach could also facilitate discussions with Member States about potential mandates and funding mechanisms.

2.3 The impact of expanded meeting modalities

This chapter looks into how the increased use of expanded meeting modalities has changed conference realities at UNOG.

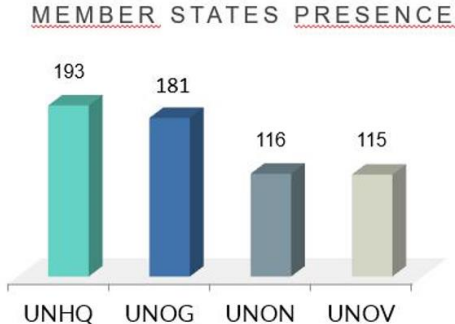
⁸ https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HRCNet_The-future-of-civil-participation-and-engage-ment-with-the-HRC-and-its-mechanisms-correct.pdf and https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/3_-statement_organizational-meeting_2022_9-December.docx.pdf.

⁹ Available at <https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/07.06.23-Letter-civil-society-participation-HR-mechanisms-FINAL.pdf>

Participation

Asked about the impact of expanded meeting modalities, 79% of meeting organizers and participants responding to the survey reported that these modalities had resulted in higher numbers of participants. An increased representation of Member States had been noted by 67% of meeting organizers and 56% of participants. Increased high-level representation was recorded by 61% of meeting organizers compared to 47% among participants. The biggest increase in participation was seen among NGOs (by 84% of meeting organizers and 74% of participants).

The greater inclusivity of meetings with online participation allowed for richer, more diverse, and more meaningful conversations, as a number of respondents emphasized. Especially smaller Missions said that hybrid formats allowed them to maximize their time and participate in more meetings than might otherwise be possible. Compared to New York Headquarters, not all Member States have a representation in Geneva, as the chart below shows. Permanent Missions are often smaller here than in New York, while the topics discussed in Geneva meetings are also more specific, requiring expert knowledge. In this context, providing hybrid options allows Member States to participate in more discussions, giving them an opportunity to prioritize meetings for in-person attendance without completely missing out on others.



In the survey, the benefits of hybrid modalities for inclusivity were emphasized by a large number of respondents. Asked about what made their recent meeting experiences positive, almost half of the respondents to this question (21 out of 46) said that the mere fact that the meeting could be offered with a remote component was a key contributor to its success and to the satisfaction of meeting participants in particular; about a quarter (12) of the respondents to this question mentioned inclusivity as a positive factor.

Other feedback received in the personal interviews suggested that the quality of interaction was lower online, compared to in-person meetings. Asked about challenges, the lack of personal contact and absence of real interpersonal relations were specifically highlighted by 10 out of the 90 conference participants responding to the survey. Especially with an increasing number of pre-recorded messages, the interactive nature of the deliberations may suffer. Even if statements are delivered personally, delegates may just read out their interventions and disappear, not even listening to the responses, as some participants complained. One person may cover several meetings at a time, but at the expense of real engagement.

“Negotiations are necessarily less effective in a virtual or hybrid format, so striving to return to primarily in-person meetings will be important for the effective conduct of UN business. Nonetheless, the provision of a remote observation or participation option has contributed significantly to the democratization of access and should be preserved” (a survey participant).

Back-to-back online meetings, sometimes taking place concurrently, combined with pressures to multitask, have led to an omnipresent screen fatigue, with an impact on the liveliness of discussions online. Personal interaction with other delegates seems to be invariably more energizing. Consequently, panelists and participants joining remotely were said to be less engaged in discussions than those in the room. In practice, it seems hard to integrate both online and in the room participants equally. Depending on whether the chair joins online or in-person, the other side can easily feel sidelined. Negotiations of politically sensitive content were not as effective online as in person; this may be a matter of trust in an online environment that sometimes seems to conceal who else is listening in. One Member State cited several cases where uninvited participants had joined online conversations. Some delegates might feel less free to speak when they know they are being recorded.

Survey participants shared varied views about the quality of online interaction: Almost half of all meeting organizers (46%) felt that the level of engagement was the same online and in-person, 34% thought it was higher and 19% thought it was lower. Among participants, only 33% thought the quality of interaction was the same, compared to 30% who thought it was higher and 31% thinking it was lower. These results seem to suggest that in the respondents’ experience, the level of engagement can be as good online as in person, depending on the parameters of the meeting.

Public outreach

In addition to an increased participation among traditional meeting participants, remote observation through webcasting and streaming has made it possible to reach new target groups among the wider public, making them aware of the UN’s work. This is in line with a general trend in events and communications where online streaming and webcasting – both much more affordable to produce than traditional broadcasting – have taken over as primary avenues of audience engagement. UN Web TV has become a major audience multiplier also for meetings held at the UN in Geneva. Meetings with mandates for webcasting, i. e. the Human Rights Council and Human Rights Treaty Bodies (representing about half of all webcast meetings in Geneva), have generated close to half a million views for 2022. In addition, there are many ways in which webcasts are reaching additional audiences. For instance, some key meetings of the HRC are re-streamed on social media platforms and leveraged by international media, expanding the audience significantly.

In addition to a quantitative measure of viewers reached, the quality of the audience is also an important indicator for impact. For instance, the reviews of country reports by the ten Human Rights Treaty Bodies are very specific content-wise and not destined to a broad audience. They are, however, followed very closely by the Government and civil society organizations of the country in question which rely heavily on this transparent, real-time coverage.

Workload and efficient use of time

A majority of organizers (64%) in the survey felt a higher workload resulting from expanded meeting modalities. This is related to the increased need for coordination between in-person and online elements. Additional preparatory meetings and testing require more time and effort and the possibility of technical problems causes higher stress levels. In particular, when parts of the technical moderation role are passed on to the substantive secretariats, staff involved are stretched. They have to monitor comments on the hybrid platform, play video messages at the required moment, help with screen sharing, give presenters a pre-warning when it is their turn, synchronize the speakers list between the online platform and the room, etc.. Having to focus on these technical aspects takes away their attention from substantive matters. The feedback strongly suggests that technical moderation would best be performed by specialized support services rather than meeting organizers. In addition, more than half of the organizers (57%) also felt that registration and access control required increased efforts in hybrid meetings.

Interestingly, the additional workload was not perceived as much by participants; it was noted by 43% within that group (compared to the 64% of organizers). Only 34% of participants felt an increased workload related to registration and access control. In general, hybrid participation provides greater flexibility and time savings for participants but requires more coordination work from organizers. While efficiency gains on the side of participants are often emphasized, two respondents also pointed out that frequent technical issues, such as difficulties to connect a person, are also related to productive time lost during a meeting. One respondent wrote about the time lost between the moderator giving the floor and the participant starting to speak, noting such dynamics made the interaction less reactive.

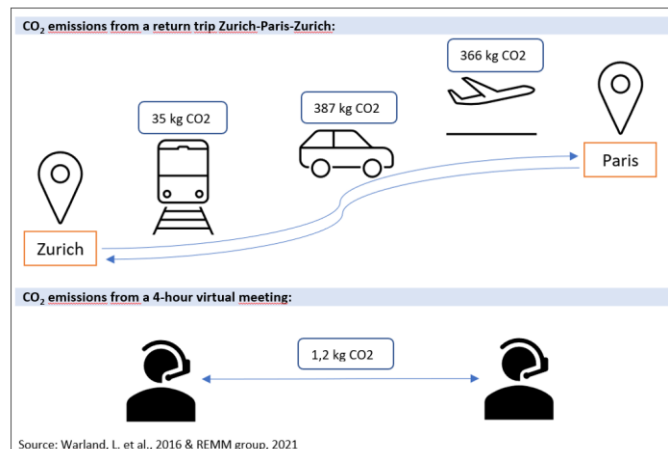
Environmental footprint

Opinions about the environmental footprint of expanded meeting modalities were rather mixed among organizers - 42% judged it to be lower, 35% higher, 16% the same. Participants were more convinced about the positive effects of expanded meeting modalities on the environment: More than half (52%) thought the impact of such meetings on the environment was lower, 26% thought it higher and 7% the same.

According to a comparison of virtual meetings and travel compiled in the framework of the Greening the Blue initiative, traveling by air generates 300 times more CO₂ emissions than a virtual meeting and adds five hours of unproductive time. In terms of the climate impact, one flight from Zurich to New York equates to 8'700 hours or 1'000 working days or 4.5 years of videoconferencing.¹⁰ By minimizing travel and

¹⁰ Warland, L., Hilty, L. M., Küng, J., & Reinhard, J. (2016). *Factsheet: Business Travel* (p. 2). Sustainability Team, University of Zurich, in a presentation by the REMM group.

reducing carbon emissions associated with transportation, hybrid meetings thus contribute to a greener approach to conducting meetings and conferences.



Comparison of CO₂ emissions for a Zurich-Paris return trip taken by train, car, or airplane and a 4-hour video call

Air travel is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions associated with global operations of international organizations and industries. [The Greening the Blue Report for 2020](#) details that the United Nations System generated around 2 million tons of CO₂eq¹¹ in 2019, 45% of which originated in air travel. Environmental considerations result in additional pressures on staff to reduce travel and explore alternative hybrid and virtual options. Some UN entities are beginning to include such ideas into their budget planning, as the [Proposed programme budget for 2024](#) illustrates: “In accordance with the 2030 Agenda, [...], OHCHR is integrating environmental management practices into its operations. [...] The Office continued to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by digitizing existing work processes [...] and increasing the use of desktop conferencing to reduce travel” (A/78/6 (Sect. 24), paragraph 24.135).

Multilingualism

Meeting organizers participating in the survey gave mixed responses about the impact of expanded meeting modalities on multilingualism; 44% saw no impact; 38% thought that multilingualism was higher and 13% thought it lower. Among meeting participants, 47% said the use of languages was the same, while 32% saw a positive impact on multilingualism, another 10% felt it was lower.

Shortening meetings with interpretation by one hour in cases of remote interventions longer than 30 minutes has had an impact on multilingual meeting time. It has been difficult to assess how many meetings were actually shortened because of the length of remote interventions. The below table gives a rough indication of how long hybrid meetings with interpretation have been, it is likely that the two-hour meetings were planned in anticipation of longer remote interventions:

¹¹ CO₂eq includes carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (The Greening the Blue Report 2020).

Meetings with interpretation held in hybrid or virtual format

Scheduled duration of meeting in hours	Jan-Dec 2022	Jan-Aug 2023
Less than one hour	34	12
1 hour or more but less than 2 hours	224	108
2 hours or more but less than 3 hours	999	190
3 hours or more but less than 4 hours	889	479
4 hours or more but less than 5 hours	4	
5 hours	1	
Grand Total	2151	789

Evaluation, Analysis and Monitoring Section (EAMS), UNOG

Data suggest that in 2022 hybrid or virtual meetings with interpretation were more likely to be 2 hours long (or shorter) than 3-hours long; this ratio seems to be inversed in 2023. This may indicate that more participants have gone back to speaking in-person and that meeting organizers have found strategies to plan their programme in ways that maximizes meeting time.

Accessibility

A majority of meeting organizers considered expanded meeting modalities as having a positive impact on accessibility (59%) or as having no impact (19%); only 3% thought accessibility was lower. Participants gave similar feedback; 62% thought accessibility was higher, 15% thought it was unchanged and 8% thought it was lower.

2.4 Best practices, challenges and lessons learnt

This chapter will look at some of the issues encountered with the increased use of expanded meeting modalities, explaining challenges and emerging solutions.

Technical issues

The biggest concerns of both organizers and participants alike are technical issues related to connectivity and sound, including background noises and ill-suited equipment that makes it hard to hear remote interventions. They seem to be the principal reasons for negative experiences in hybrid and virtual meetings, referred to by about half of meeting organizers (30 out of 65 responses) and by about a third of participants (31 of 90).

Meeting participants today are more experienced, they have a better understanding of the importance of well-adapted technical equipment, and they are more used to the fact that technical issues may occur. Organizers continue to reach out to speakers about the need for the right equipment and a suitable set-up but some speakers and participants remain unwilling or unable to comply. Organizers complained that speakers are unavailable for prior testing, expecting UNOG service providers to manage

any issues that may be encountered on the spot. Some respondents demanded that testing be made mandatory.

The impact of sub-optimal sound quality on interpretation continues to be a big issue for meeting organizers and participants alike. Clients have found it difficult to accommodate the rule that meetings with interpretation should be shortened to two hours if remote interventions exceed 30 minutes. In the survey, about a quarter of respondents (15 of 65) to the question about negative experiences and challenges during the last three meetings, specifically highlighted difficulties caused by the reduction of meeting time to two hours. Sometimes, this rule has resulted in a reorganization of the programme in a way that would maximize the use of interpretation time, spreading out the remote interventions across the programme, at the expense of the flow of the discussion. Some clients may have avoided organizing hybrid meetings altogether simply to avoid having their meeting time shortened. One respondent explained that the interpretation modalities had not been sufficiently explained so that the reduction in meeting time with interpretation came as a surprise and had to be managed on the spot. The reduced time for their deliberations was also considered problematic by participants (7 of the 90) as it discriminated against remotely connected participants in terms of speaking time and because it effectively shortened the time for questions and discussion. Under all kinds of questions, respondents in the survey demanded that a solution be found to offer unlimited interpretation in 3-hour meetings, regardless of the length of remote interventions.

Meeting organizers are particularly concerned about their choice of platforms. Zoom is generally preferred, as Webex is found to be less user-friendly and more prone to encountering technical issues. Users do not appreciate the default choice of Webex for meetings in only one language and of Zoom for meetings with interpretation. If organizers choose Webex, it is mostly because the platform is cheaper and can be run on automatic mode which means they are not billed for technical support. In reality, when technical issues are encountered during a Webex session in automatic mode, the technical support will still be contacted, except that they would not have foreseen the related capacity. On the planning side, it seems advisable to foresee technical support for all meetings, Webex or Zoom, to be able to plan the capacities needed. The new room set-ups have become so sophisticated that it becomes virtually impossible for a lay person to manage their complexity. The absence of support may result in sub-standard quality and given that meetings are often streamed on social media or archived online for later viewing, any malfunctioning may potentially have a large audience. This may reflect badly on the UN as a meeting provider. Systematically offering technical support for all platforms should result in similar prices and give clients a real choice for which platform is best suited to their meeting and most comfortable to those who run it.

The same technical support should be made available to NGOs. If accredited with ECOSOC, they can organize specific meetings with the assistance of the NGO Liaison Office at UNOG. However, they are not eligible to receive interpretation or technical support services. This may (and regularly does) result in sub-standard meeting quality. Some of the meetings are streamed and recorded for global consumption and the lack of quality reflects badly on the UN as a meeting hub. NGOs often lack the funds to pay for additional services. It could be good to consider providing such technical support as a standard, in response to post-COVID realities and expectations and to support NGO engagement with the UN.

Several other technical issues were said to contribute to sub-optimal meeting experiences in the survey:

- Automatic cameras zoom in on the speaker when the microphone is switched on. However, when a previous speaker forgets to switch off the microphone, the camera zooms out to the

wide view. One respondent suggested that microphones switch off automatically when a new microphone is switched on, another that unused microphones might be switched off by an individual backstage.

- While documents shared in a fully remote meeting might be visible closeup on a small laptop screen, they are usually too small to be seen from the back of the room if projected on the big screen in a conference room.
- There should be no time-limitation to accessing transcriptions and recordings, and sharing recordings with participants outside of the UN should become easier.
- Lack of information on how to use UNOG equipment, such as how to use the technical panels in the room to switch between the presentation on the laptop to the room view.
- The links not working, being changed or being given too late, also having to look for the right links across different emails
- Not knowing who is speaking
- Live captioning is not yet of sufficiently good quality.
- IT security issues: alleged surveillance and spying of online meetings.

Services related to expanded meeting modalities

The “smooth interaction of software, hardware and human efforts”, as one survey participant put it, is key for a successful meeting. The single most mentioned factor to ensure the success of a meeting – highlighted by about a quarter of meeting organizers who responded to this question (13 of 46) - was the rapid availability of competent technical support and the good communication with operators and technicians, as well as IT support. The different aspects mentioned included user-friendly guidance, clear identification of interlocutors to be contacted in case of a problem, pre-meeting coordination and testing, the presence of a dedicated technician during the meeting who can intervene rapidly in case of an issue, and highly-skilled technical moderators.

The organization of hybrid and virtual meetings has created new coordination challenges. For in-person meetings, the standard case pre-COVID, all information needed was pre-discussed with the Meetings Management Section (MMS) at the moment of the room reservation and then captured in gMeets. With the advent of hybrid and virtual meetings, making arrangements for the IT and audio-visual aspects of the meetings generated considerable additional correspondence with the respective service providers. To capture the necessary parameters, a Hybrid Events Request form was developed, that should be disseminated to organizers of hybrid meetings. Later, a separate Single Point of Entry (SPOE) platform was developed on iSeek to capture relevant IT services only. SPOE seems to have made the previous form redundant, but as a result, AV services are missing important information. There are currently efforts to link SPOE information with gMeets, but full information of the event does not seem to be available in any one place. Yet another layer of coordination may be added for meetings with webcast, the details of which have to be arranged for separately with the webcasting team. In addition, meeting organizers have complained that they had to make too many separate submissions for a complex conference, indicating a need for bulk requests for several days, for example.

Having to provide meeting information through different channels creates a number of problems. It dilutes the central coordination function of MMS, as some clients may concentrate on the hybrid aspects of their meeting and neglect to provide information to MMS and in gMeets. MMS should be the

first point of entry for clients organizing meetings, but its staff may not be in possession of all the necessary technical knowledge to be able to fully coordinate hybrid meeting aspects. A lack of guidance on certain aspects may lead to clients arriving in the room with wrong expectations. It might be worth investing in ongoing training of MMS staff so they have the information needed to make meeting organizers aware of the technical aspects of the meeting that need to be arranged for with IT and AV services.¹² If service providers do not have full information about the requirements of a meeting, this may result in the delivery of sub-standard meetings, carrying a reputational risk for the organization which wishes to establish itself as a hub of modern conferencing.

Having to cater to different systems (e. g. gMeets, Indico.UN, SPOE) also creates extra work for clients who must fill in key meeting details in different places. It also generates extra work for the team to clarify requirements and may even result in contradictory information. Ideally, all information should be captured in gMeets which should be improved to be more easily adaptable to the evolving needs of meeting organization. Capacity should be set aside to clean up the current gMeets platform from elements that are no longer relevant, adding others that have become necessary. It would also be preferable to have a meetings management system that is more user-friendly and does not require expert knowledge to be filled in. Given the fast pace of changing requirements in the run up to a meeting, such a tool should be able to accommodate frequent changes. Some of these issues might be addressed with the introduction of the One-Stop-Shop (OSS), but it might be more than a year before this new system is finally rolled out in Geneva. It should be ensured that OSS is in line with the information needs of all service providers involved in meeting organization.

Another problem emanating from the use of different platforms is that clients have difficulty receiving a complete overview of the charges they should expect. The SPOE platform gives an overview of the IT-related costs of a meeting but does not cover other aspects. Clients sometimes take the SPOE price as the final amount and are surprised when they receive a higher bill in the end. Finally, clients also had an issue with having to identify the budget source for their meeting in advance within the SPOE. Before, meeting organizers could often reattribute unused funds to the extra costs of expanded meeting modalities, but those would only become known after the event. The need to have approval of a certifying officer seems to create additional problems.

Another issue has increased complexity, namely the parallel use of conference rooms, managed by MMS, and meeting rooms, self-managed but overseen by ICTS. The latter were largely designed for staff meetings in the H-Building, but they have become more and more popular among meeting organizers to host smaller informal meetings with Member States. ICTS has been faced with requests to organize interpretation in such meeting rooms; however, they are not serviced by UN interpreters. As hybrid formats are here to stay, the small and medium-sized H-Building rooms will continue to be in demand. Some clients also seem to show a certain preference for interacting with IT service providers directly, thereby circumventing the more cumbersome gMeets procedure. Different management systems of meeting rooms may lead to confusion as to why different levels of support are given in different

¹² As an outcome of the Conferencing Today & Tomorrow – 2 project, an information portal was developed on the ungeneva.org website to provide step-by-step guidance to conference organizers, including on all aspects of a meeting that they have to arrange for separately with different services. It would be advisable that MMS, with support from key services, takes an active role in updating the portal, as information evolves rapidly and clients expressed a real need to have updated information available on a website (rather than disseminated through series of emails, notes verbales or being published on iSeek, which cannot be accessed by meeting organizers outside the Secretariat).

settings. Ultimately, the client expects that support is provided rapidly when technical issues occur, regardless of the type of meeting room.

Finally, the new strong role of AV and IT support has raised the question about the role of meeting room assistants. Respondents have noted that they have less of a role in collecting printed speeches and passing them on to interpreters. Some respondents felt that conference officers have become less present in the room since the COVID-19 pandemic. Conference organizers have suggested they should have a greater presence and play a more proactive role in supporting the various aspects of virtual or hybrid meetings.

Time zones

Accommodating different time zones within a hybrid meeting remains an important issue which was raised by several respondents. One feedback reads: *“Accessibility for stakeholders will only really make a difference if working hours are adjusted to various time zones. If we cannot have minimum service throughout the day (i. e. lunchbreak for all at same time) - and before 10 or after 6 - then the benefits of remote are limited”*. Some fear that the use of expanded meeting modalities also creates new exclusion for those who can never sensibly participate in meetings that are organized during Geneva office hours, because for them it means working through the night, which puts them at a disadvantage because they are not at their best for intense negotiations.

“The timing that was set required me to be awake starting at 1 a.m. in the morning as there is a 9-hour time difference between my location and Geneva. There was no burden sharing - those in Geneva were consistently working from 10 am to 6 pm which was comfortable for them. However, unpaid/pro bono experts based in cities such as Tokyo who served on the UN human rights committees during COVID-19 were expected to be awake at all hours and make the difficult decisions that their roles require at those times. This was an unreasonable expectation”.

Précis-writing

Précis-writing has been affected in a particular way as a consequence of the COVID-19 experience. With between 500 and 600 meetings per year requiring summary records, some 2'500 freelance days per year are required to cover the workload. During COVID, preparing summary records remotely has worked relatively well, so much so that freelancers have become less willing to travel to Geneva or be away from their families for several weeks to cover a session. As a consequence, it has become more difficult to recruit the necessary number of précis-writers – at a time when the English Translation Section is a third short of its staff and confronted by a hiring freeze. The English Translation Section does not have a budget to cover Webex connections for remote précis writers. If remote connections have to be set up specifically to allow remote précis-writing (i.e. for meetings that would otherwise take place in-person only), the cost is currently absorbed by the Division of Administration at a rate of 345 USD per 3-hour meeting. While hiring freelancers who work offsite costs less because they are paid at the world rate and do not have to travel, having more freelancers operate off-site has generated additional coordination work for on-site staff. Issues may also appear around accessing UN documents remotely and about handling remote observation in closed or private meetings.

Event formats

The official length of meetings has not changed as a consequence of hybrid or virtual modalities. However, in reality, meeting participants have shorter attention spans in remote settings and meetings outside the official pre-set UN framework have tended to become shorter and shorter. The Library & Archives, for example now offer online meetings no longer than 45 minutes and their video casts are less than half an hour. Some respondents suggested that in the medium- to long-term, UN conferencing should reconsider their organization into three-hour blocks, breaking them up into three two-hour blocks or even shorter slots. Three-hour blocks are found to be too long, even for fully in-person meetings. To have the full attention of participants, meeting blocks of one hour or one-and-a-half hours might be better adapted. In addition, staggering the starting time of meetings may make it possible that meeting room assistants are present at the beginning of every meeting, even if they are assigned to several meetings in parallel. The beginning of meetings is seen as a particularly intense period and if all meetings start at the same time (usually 10 a.m.) the time just before becomes a particularly intense period. When troubleshooting becomes necessary at several meetings at the same time, it might be impossible to attend to all meetings equally.

In terms of managing hybrid and virtual meetings, organizers and participants have highlighted a few good practices:

- It is helpful when moderators build in specific speaking slots for online participants, dispersed throughout the meeting, to make sure they are not forgotten by in-person participants.
- The chat provides an additional avenue for engagement, some people feel more comfortable commenting in the chat than taking the floor, for example those lower in the hierarchy.
- Meeting organizer/moderator reading out the comments and questions written in the chat and addressing them
- Using interactive tools such as Slido, etc.
- A timer to be integrated and visible for online and in-room participants
- The ability to watch recordings online after the event or pass them on to others (NB: It should be made easier to share them with participants outside the UN).

Innovations

Respondents in the survey were in favour of exploring the opportunities offered by the following innovations:

- AI-models (speech-to-speech and speech-to-text) should be tested in real meetings and scaled up; automated captioning in various languages and automated interpretation
- National language interpretation
- Generation of automated summaries
- Provision of sign language interpretation financed from the regular budget
- Innovations that allow remote participants to engage more easily with those physically present
- Connecting systems of online registration and accreditation of delegates with the remote conferencing platforms to streamline the access to hybrid meetings, for example, providing the links to the meetings in Indico.UN or HRC Sched for example

- Using modern technologies like VR and AR for virtual meetings
- Prevent interception of digital meetings, especially those involving the human rights mechanisms
- Fixed power sockets/outlets in the E building for delegates to charge their electronic devices.

2.5 Mandates

In its resolution 77/262 of 30 December 2022, the GA endorsed the ACABQ’s observations that “the provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires a mandate from the General Assembly along with approved legal parameters and technical requirements” and that “the Committee on Conferences could review the necessary requirements for the provision of hybrid and virtual meetings, based on a rigorous assessment by the Secretariat, including best practices, challenges and lessons learnt, and in consultation with Member States, for the consideration of the Assembly.”

The Pattern of conferences report ([A/78/96](#)) confirms: “As noted by the Advisory Committee [on Administrative and Budgetary Questions], the provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires a mandate from the General Assembly, along with approved legal parameters and technical requirements. In this connection, there may be a need to clarify how the rules of procedure would be applied in a formal meeting being held in hybrid or virtual format”.

GA mandates with budget implications are already in place for webcasting of the HRC regular session and Human Rights Treaty Bodies’ sessions. Webcast coverage for these meetings is serviced on the Department of Global Communications (DGC) regular budget (Section 28, managed by UNIS’ parent department in New York). The HRC regularly passes resolutions which create new webcasting mandates under the regular budget. During this year alone, there have been at least five new mandates, and more are likely to be agreed upon during the current session. The General Assembly will then decide whether the requested corresponding funds are granted under Section 28 of the Programme Budget, or whether DGC is asked to cover the expenses with existing resources. Several other entities have been considering the inclusion of webcasting in their mandates.

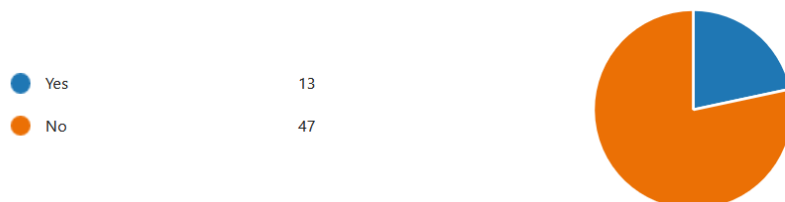
In the feedback provided, meeting organizers have expressed the need for a more overarching GA mandate, to provide clarity about the conditions under which hybrid meetings can take place, such as:

- Clarification of the status of virtual meetings as formal or informal
- Remote decision-making modalities, including the management of the “silent procedure” with remote participants and the possibility that the connection might be interrupted
- Elections, voting and the quorum, e. g. how to make sure that only eligible accredited representatives of Member States can vote and how to ensure a secret ballot
- How to secure authentication, ensuring that meetings are attended by accredited and eligible delegates only, particularly for private or closed meetings
- How to manage the online distribution of restricted documents
- The status of comments in the meeting chat
- The time dedicated to interventions
- The languages that should be provided
- Data protection.

In the survey, which was also disseminated among other UN entities in Geneva, outside the Secretariat, 78% of respondents confirmed that they currently had no mandate.

15. Does your relevant governing body provide a mandate for the organization of expanded meeting modalities, e.g., hybrid format, fully virtually, or other aspects?

[More Details](#)



Looking at the 13 positive responses, they included respondents from UNCTAD, OHCHR and UNECE, indicating the amendment of certain rules of procedures, for example. One respondent wrote: “We did it during COVID so surely it can be done”. The positive answers to this question may in part be related to the fact that the absence of a mandate has not hindered meeting organizers to request such modalities (as long as costs are covered).

From outside the UN core system, ISO has indicated the existence of a mandate for hybrid modalities. Through the interviews, ITU was found to have adopted a mandate ([RESOLUTION 167 \(REV. BUCHAREST, 2022\) Strengthening and developing ITU capabilities for fully virtual meetings and physical meetings with remote participation, and the electronic means to advance the work of the Union](#), Final Acts of the Plenipotentiary Conference Bucharest, 2022). In this resolution, ITU resolves to “continue to develop its facilities and capabilities to organize and conduct fully virtual meetings and physical meetings with remote participation by electronic means for the meetings of the Union” and to “develop high-level guidance for the management and governance of fully virtual meetings and physical meetings with remote participation”. It highlights the need to assist countries with bandwidth limitations to fully access the electronic working methods (EWM), as expanded meeting modalities are referred to in the document. The annex to the resolution lists issues to be regulated, including for example the need for an increased flexibility in the timing and length of meetings. Conclusions on the budgetary implications have not yet been reached and related discussions will be continued in October 2023, with the aim of identifying funds for implementation from 2024 onwards.

The Bureau of the Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) of UNAIDS has presented [Modalities and Procedures for 2023 UNAIDS PCB Meetings](#) which outline how the 2023 PCB meetings can be held in-person with optional online participation. It is assumed that there are no cost implications. The paper sets out that all pre-meetings will be held online, explains decision making procedures and modalities for online participation.

Examples such as those from ITU and UNAIDS may provide some useful inspiration for the potential negotiation of mandates by the GA or individual governing bodies. Regarding the general provision of a GA mandate for hybrid and virtual meetings, interviewees thought this was unlikely to be adopted in the current session and might likely take another three or four years. Some Member States are expected to

block any advances in this regard, until issues regarding the quality and security of the available technology solutions have been resolved.

2.6 Budgets

In the survey, both meeting organizers and participants were asked about the impact of expanded meeting modalities on the budget. A majority of meeting organizers (61%) indicated increased budgetary needs, compared to 12% who thought needs were unchanged and 16 % who thought less budget was needed. Interestingly, a majority of participants (41%) thought the required budget would be lower, an indicator that participants did not grasp the full budgetary implications and complexities of organizing hybrid meetings. Only 21% thought the budget might be higher.

Since 2022, clients have been charged for the use of hybrid or virtual meetings or webcasting (with the exception of webcasting for the HRC and Treaty Bodies that already has an established mandate). As a reference, the baseline fees at the time of writing are listed below (in USD).

Type	Rate
RSI – Zoom: RB	
1st 2-hour meeting	1'405
Recurrent 2-hour meeting	599
1st 3-hour meeting	1'586
Recurrent 3-hour meeting	780
RSI Zoom: XB	
1st 2-hour meeting	1'586
Recurrent 2-hour meeting	675
1st 3-hour meeting	1,790
Recurrent 3-hour meeting	879
Webex	
Preparation and testing (per session)	168
Execution and monitoring (per hour)	59
Webcast*	
RB rates (per day)	480
XB rates (per day)	540

* XB clients will receive an additional bill of 600 USD/day from the Department of Global Communications in New York for the webcast platform use fees which covers the use of the UN Web TV platform, bandwidth, storage, and global distribution.

These figures confirm that organizing a hybrid meeting can pay off from the first participant, noting however, that the potential savings from travel costs are usually on the side of meeting participants, while the expenses for hybrid modalities are incurred fully on the side of conference organizers and there is no direct transfer of funds. If the average inbound flight to Geneva and back to the point of departure cost 1'916 USD in 2023 (January to September 2023), and a DSA of 400.56 USD (average of January to September 2023) is paid, the average cost of travel for one participant for one day (2'316.56 USD) is higher than the additional cost of one RB meeting (a three-hour slot) using an RSI platform (e. g. 1'586 USD) and almost the same as the additional cost of a day of hybrid RB meetings using RSI platforms (two three-hour slots, e. g. 2'366 USD). One person not travelling would be enough to offset the costs of Webex for RB meetings between one and five days.

Comparative costs and break-even points for 1-5 days of meetings:

	2023 travel costs Flight: 1'916 USD DSA: 400.56 USD	Costs for hybrid services:	Break-even at:
1 day	Flight + 1 DSA = 2'316.56 USD	3-hour slots/RSI/RB 1 day: 2'366 USD 3-hour slots/RSI/XB 1 day: 2'669 USD 2x3 hours Webex: 522 USD 1 day webcasting RB/XB: 1'080/1'140 USD	2 participants 2 participants 1 participant 1 user
2 days	Flight + 2 DSA = 2'717.12 USD	3-hour slots/RSI/RB 2 days: 3'926 USD 3-hour slots/RSI/XB 2 days: 4'427 USD 4x3 hours Webex: 876 USD 2 days webcasting RB/XB: 2'160/2'280 USD	2 participants 2 participants 1 participant 1 user
3 days	Flight + 3 DSA = 3'117.68 USD	3-hour slots/RSI/RB 3 days: 5'486 USD 3-hour slots/RSI/XB 3 days: 6'185 USD 6x3 hours Webex: 1'230 USD 3 days webcasting RB/XB: 3'240/3'420 USD	2 participants 2 participants 1 participant 2 users
4 days	Flight + 4 DSA = 3'518.24 USD	3-hour slots/RSI/RB 4 days: 7'046 USD 3-hour slots/RSI/XB 4 days: 7'958 USD 8x3 hours Webex: 1'584 USD 4 days webcasting RB/XB: 4'320/4'560 USD	3 participants 3 participants 1 participant 2 users
5 days	Flight + 5 DSA = 3'918.80 USD	3-hour slots/RSI/RB 5 days: 8'606 USD 3-hour slots/RSI/XB 5 days: 9'701 USD 10x3 hours Webex: 1'938 USD 5 days webcasting RB/XB: 5'400/5'700 USD	3 participants 3 participants 1 participant 2 users

In 2022, the average ticket price for inbound flights issued through UNOG travel services was 1'947.15 USD and the average DSA 378.50 USD, resulting in an average travel cost per participant of 2'325.65 USD. If the 37'007 participants joining UNOG meetings with interpretation online from within Switzerland are deducted from the total of 156'003 online participants, the remaining 118'996 online participants from outside Switzerland would have saved an estimated 276'743'047 USD for travel. The potential savings in 2022 are 220 times the amount paid for hybrid meetings using RSI platforms that year (1'254'001 USD).

Even with the decreasing numbers of hybrid meeting participants in 2023, the savings are still likely to be significant: Between January and September 2023, there were 49'641 remote participants in meetings using RSI platforms of which 22'008 joined from within Switzerland, resulting in 27'633 remote participants from outside the country who might have saved 64'013'502 USD in terms of travel cost, assuming an average of 2'316.56 USD for an air ticket and one DSA. Pro-rated for 2023, this would amount to 36'844 online participants from outside Switzerland who might have saved an estimated 85'351'337 USD for travel. The savings are 92 times the amount paid for hybrid services using RSI platforms in 2023 (924'943 USD, pro-rated for the year, based on figures from January to August 2023). In addition, the 16'058 remote participants from outside Switzerland in Webex meetings generated opportunities for savings of 37'199'320 USD in travel costs (January to September 2023). Pro-rated for 2023, 21'411 remote participants on Webex could generate savings as high as 49'599'093 USD or 190 times the amount spent on providing Webex-related services (260'694 USD). Even if not all online participants had actually travelled to Geneva in case of a meeting held fully in-person, and even if some participants might have covered several meetings with one flight, the potential savings are enormous.

Amounts charged to clients for their use of hybrid and virtual meetings and webcasting since 2019 (in USD)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (January- August)	2023 pro- rated
Total RSI ¹³	14'129	4'662	59'573	1'254'001	483'762	924'943
Total Webex ¹⁴	7'510	81'026	69'293	109'078	173'796	260'694
Total Webcast ¹⁵	649 ¹⁶	55'407	63'388	62'103	82'886	124'329
Total Charged	22'288	141'095	192'254	1'425'182	740'444	1'309'966

About two-thirds of the amounts invoiced for RSI/Zoom in 2022 and in 2023 (January-August) related to RB meetings, see breakdown below (in USD).

¹³ Meetings with Remote Simultaneous Interpretation (RSI) are usually now carried out on Zoom. Costs are recovered for IT and audio-visual services.

¹⁴ Meetings without RSI are mostly carried out on Webex and incur IT costs.

¹⁵ Webcasting of meetings is managed by a team at the UN Information Service (UNIS).

¹⁶ Colleagues at UNIS provided feedback that more webcasting should have taken place pre-COVID than this figure suggests. It is possible that figures were not recorded systematically at the time.

	2022	2023 (January-August)	2023 pro-rated
RB	825'160	315'820	666'140
XB	428'841	167'942	258'803

Charging for expanded meeting modalities has been met with some resistance by clients which had gotten used to hybrid meeting services without any charges during business continuity. From 2022 onward, clients have been charged for hybrid meeting services and clients who did not feel in a position to cover the related costs from their budget stopped requesting such modalities. Several respondents thought it unlikely that funding for their body would be increased to cover for additional hybrid or virtual meeting costs, simply because there was a general sentiment that budgets should not be increased. Member States also do not seem to be inclined to make unspent travel funds (because of online participation) available to the UN to organize such modalities.

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that clients (especially RB clients) would have liked to organize more meetings with remote options, had they been available to them without additional charges. Some have remarked that giving hybrid modalities only to those clients who could pay created a multi-class system that was not in line with the UN's values that stood for equal opportunities.

Asked whether or not they would be able to cover the costs of expanded meeting modalities in the next two years from their budget, only 40% said yes while 60% said no.

12. Will you be able to cover your needs with expanded meeting modalities, e.g., hybrid format, fully virtually, or other aspects, organization in the next two years from your budget?

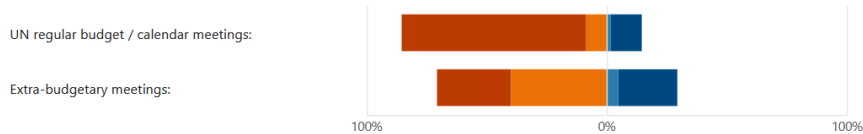
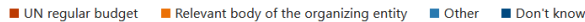
[More Details](#)



Asked who in their opinion should pay for expanded modalities, 77% of meeting organizers said that RB meetings should be covered from the regular budget. For XB meetings, 31% thought that hybrid and other modalities should also be covered from the regular budget, while 40% thought this should come from the budget of the relevant body.

13. Who in your opinion should pay for services related to expanded meeting modalities, e.g., hybrid format, fully virtually, or other aspects?

[More Details](#)



Making an assessment of how much it would cost to cover hybrid needs of clients is not straight forward, since not all clients who would like to use hybrid formats are currently requesting them, due to lack of funds. In addition, the level of required services may be quite different so that the charges would be variable. At present, the use of RSI/Zoom platforms is charged at a higher price than Webex. To have a better understanding of the potential financial implications of offering hybrid meetings to clients, several calculations have been made, considering different assumptions (based on pro-rated 2023 figures for the meeting numbers):

1. The estimate to have *all RB meetings*, both with and without interpretation (1'530 sessions for 5'535 meetings, 115% more than those with interpretation) serviced *through RSI platforms* would be approx. 6'117'000 USD. This figure can be considered as an upper ceiling, as not all meetings will require the full-service level as for meetings with interpretation, nor is it likely that hybrid meetings would even be requested or needed for all RB meetings. Based on the survey responses, the average use of hybrid meetings in the coming years would be at 58% of meetings; that would translate into a required budget of 3'548'025 USD to cover RB meetings with RSI/Zoom services.

Entity	sessions	meetings	All RSI	%
ECE	195	732	798,014	13%
ILC	9	171	131,690	2%
ODA	99	363	399,179	7%
OHCHR	252	2,718	2,256,303	37%
Others	713	1,133	1,849,742	30%
UNCTAD	87	192	262,997	4%
UNOG	176	227	419,360	7%
	1,530	5,535	6,117,285	

2. The cost to service *all RB meetings with Webex* would be 1'056'000 USD. It should be noted that Webex may not technically be able to provide all functionalities needed for meetings with interpretation.

Entity	sessions	meetings	All webex	%
ECE	195	732	138,475	13%
ILC	9	171	26,208	2%
ODA	99	363	69,056	7%
OHCHR	252	2,718	434,870	41%
Others	713	1,133	283,256	27%
UNCTAD	87	192	42,345	4%
UNOG	176	227	62,195	6%
	1,530	5,535	1,056,405	

To cover an average of 58% of RB meetings with Webex services, a budget of 612'715 USD would be necessary.

3. The cost to service all *RB meetings currently organized with interpretation through RSI platforms* (378 sessions for 2'573 meetings) would be 2'345'000 USD.

Entity	sessions	meetings	All RSI	%
ECE	132	537	568,878	24%
ILC	9	171	131,690	6%
ODA	14	191	151,908	6%
OHCHR	159	1,527	1,293,703	55%
Others	14	36	45,101	2%
UNCTAD	21	83	88,477	4%
UNOG	30	30	65,659	3%
	378	2,574	2,345,415	

4. The cost to service all *RB meetings with interpretation through Webex* would be 435,000 USD (noting that some meetings with interpretation might in fact need servicing through Zoom for reasons related to specific technical requirements).

Entity	sessions	meetings	All RSI	%
ECE	132	537	99,730	23%
ILC	9	171	26,208	6%
ODA	14	191	29,780	7%
OHCHR	159	1,527	247,241	57%
Others	14	36	7,467	2%
UNCTAD	21	83	15,443	4%
UNOG	30	30	9,373	2%
	378	2,574	435,241	

5. Servicing *XB meetings including those without interpretation* (204 session for 554 meetings) through RSI platforms would cost 773'000 USD (NB: There may be considerable variations in the number of XB meetings from year to year).

Entity	No. Sessions	N.meetings	RSI support	%
ODA	14	98	98,319	13%
OHCHR	35	122	152,323	20%
Others	135	288	450,793	58%
UNOG	21	47	71,441	9%
			772,876	

6. The cost of servicing this year's estimated number of *XB meetings* (January to August figures pro-rated for 2023) *with Webex* would be 114'000 USD.

Entity	No. Sessions	N.meetings	RSI support	%
ODA	14	98	16,349	14%
OHCHR	35	122	23,343	20%
Others	135	288	64,273	56%
UNOG	21	47	10,244	9%
			114,208	

One suggestion made in an interview was to integrate the hybrid meeting option by default into all meetings, requiring a set cost from all clients, whether or not they decide to make use of that option. This would address the fact that hybrid meeting options often come as a last-minute request. It would allow creating economies of scale and facilitate the planning of internal resources for the servicing of hybrid meetings. Finally, it would also avoid a situation where clients who would in principle like to use the hybrid option, do not request it because they do not have a budget to pay for it. At the same time, a cost increase for all clients regardless of whether or not they use hybrid services will likely be met with

some resistance, in particular as the costs for technical support are likely to increase anyway in the near future. In the absence of a GA mandate, there is also some hesitation as to whether this might be a feasible option.

2.7 SWOT analysis

Different event formats come with various strengths and opportunities as well as weaknesses and threats. These different aspects of hybrid and in-person meeting modalities will be captured below. The tables summarize the judgements expressed in the survey, comparing in-person only with the possibility to use expanded meeting modalities.

In-person only

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person meetings are key to the international Geneva ecosystem, offering a platform where people from all around the world can meet, discuss and network • High-quality debates and better levels of engagement, especially for negotiations and sensitive topics • Effective deliberations - greater impact • Personal contact and trust-building • Possibility to observe body language and reactions • Informal consultations can happen more easily • Less variation in meeting formats are easier to manage • Excellent conference location available with strong support from service providers, many years of experience • High-quality interpretation with optimal sound quality for interpreters • Beautiful meeting rooms in a beautiful location • Lower risk of technical issues, everyone receives the same level of technical support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would result in lower participation than in pre-COVID times, reduced diversity of opinions • Lack of inclusiveness, lack of participation by non-Geneva experts, incl. on panels, especially from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), fewer high-level speakers, especially in smaller meetings; unequal treatment of Member States without physical presence in Geneva, UN discussions remain accessible only to the 'richer' ones, to the detriment of participants from the Global South • Exclusion of civil society, bias towards the voices of richer NGOs with representation in Europe; adverse impact on the amount and quality of information received, e. g. on important human rights issues • Lower participation from persons with disabilities • High costs related to travel - conflict with decreasing travel budgets • Not efficient for organizations to travel to long sessions mainly to observe or intervene only briefly

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased carbon footprint for participation of participants who have to travel
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities to develop and expand relationships in a way that assists the smoother running of meetings and organizations in future 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice seen as “outdated” - Geneva conferencing is seen as going backwards instead of forwards Loss of credibility and reputational risk in terms of SDG implementation: The UN is committed to fighting climate change and has to lead the way by lowering its own ecological footprint. It would become increasingly difficult to explain why we force everyone to fly to Geneva Meetings may move to better equipped cheaper conference centres elsewhere The technical infrastructure that was put in place will become outdated if not used, it may be dysfunctional when another crisis hits Risk for democracy, not all positions represented Reduced visibility: the loss of social media dissemination of live-broadcast events from the Palais - diminished public interest Lack of ownership of UN's work from the public and civil society Risk of reprisals for human rights defenders Visa issues faced by participants

It is worth noting that 36 respondents explicitly noted that there were no strengths or opportunities related to in-person only meetings at all. In addition, the question about strengths and opportunities of an all-in-person setting generated a number of passionate responses in favour of hybrid modalities, some examples are listed below (there were many more along the same lines):

- “Honestly, I don't think it's a strength if we only do in-person, we will be seen as archaic and behind our time (and as a talk shop). We need to revisit the purpose of what we're trying to achieve and if in-person meetings [are] always the best way to achieve it, assessing the supposedly expected additional efficiency against the climate change effects of traveling (so basically a cost-benefit analysis of doing in-person meetings vs. virtual). For the body I'm servicing, which is quite technical, I have the feeling that the future will likely hold more online meetings and less frequent in-person meetings with a distance mode of participation to firm up decisions”.*
- “We will fall far behind the times and look like an outdated, old-fashioned organization incapable of adapting to change! We will also lose out on the new-found and positive contributions of participants from very far away, such as Australia and New Zealand. They will form creative and*

practical alliances with regions closer to home, and we will not benefit from their expertise, making us fall behind those regions in our thinking”.

- *“It seems to be outdated to consider organizing in-person meetings only. UNOG might lose some of the meetings organized, because some people got used not to travel anymore and to connect from their own country”.*
- *“We do not see strengths nor opportunities for in-person meetings only going forward. This would be a missed opportunity”.*
- *“Virtual access to meetings is a reality of our present time and the UN should seek ways to leverage this”.*
- *“Remote access is seen to be a standard for conferencing. Failure to offer [it] may be perceived as ‘falling behind’ on industry practices”.*
- *“The UN in Geneva would give the impression of an organization stuck in the XXth century and not in sync with the outside world.”*

Hybrid modalities

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broader participation and inclusiveness, potentially greater geographic representation and easier access to high-level representatives and civil society, including marginalized or excluded communities or persons in situations of vulnerability; accessibility to persons with disabilities • The "right" people participate, rather than the person that could physically be present; Permanent Missions do not have specialists on all subject matters and smaller local NGOs do not have to go through larger Europe-based NGOs or networks • Expanded diversity of opinion and positions, leading to more meaningful discussions and resulting in a better, more democratic process and ultimately in more inclusive and informed decisions • Better work-life balance for conference participants through reduced travel • Geneva-based Permanent Missions, staff and other stakeholders appreciate the possibility to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased workload on organizers, more complex to manage, higher coordination requirements, additional costs to organizers • Lack of human contact and personal connections, weakened engagement • Lower quality of dialogue, in controversial discussions outcomes may be less ambitious • Lack of informal exchanges between sessions • Difficulty in creating the same experience for in-person and remote participants, one side may feel excluded; may create a two-class system where in-person participants benefit more • Shorter meeting time for meetings with interpretation when remote interventions exceed 30 minutes • Connectivity is a challenge in some places • Unpredictability of when technical issues may occur, time lost to technical troubleshooting • Confidentiality, not being sure who else is listening • Difficulty to accommodate all time zones • Missing the beautiful view of the conference rooms and the Palais des Nations

<p>cover more meetings through remote participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical infrastructure for remote participation is already in place • More environmentally friendly, reduced carbon footprint, contribution to implementing the 2030 Agenda • Better visibility and increased ownership of UN's work from civil society and the public at large • Easy to record sessions and to make recordings available for asynchronous consumption • Best-adapted to client needs 	
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UN in Geneva would be pioneering in conferencing, making international Geneva a hub for innovation in multilateral affairs • Enhanced relevance of UNOG • Cost savings through reduced travel • More effective use of time • Mitigating the impact of SHP-related reduced room capacity • Transparency • Crisis prevention and preparedness • Better tracking through data, identify patterns and adjust the offerings to the needs of users • Captioning potential 	<p style="text-align: right;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less physical presence in the conference rooms raises the question about maintaining these rooms and upgrading them constantly (assuming that the virtual format takes over) • Diluting the seriousness or impact of the work, due to less engaged online participants • The spirit of multilateral cooperation may not translate fully into the virtual world. • Limited interpretation facilities will harm multilingualism • People may back out of live participation, if remote participation is an option; becoming complacent, being too much in the comfort zone of the home environment • Can be used to deny visa or travel costs to potential participants as they have alternative ways to connect; Least Developed Countries (LDCs) may receive less funding for travel • More participation means that more time is needed to hear all participants (time management) • Less in-person engagement, which is essential in human relationships - impact on relationship building, which is essential for the effective functioning of multilateral work • Lack of resources and legal framework pose a threat for validity and sustainability of expanded modalities • IT security risks (which also exist for in-person meetings, with delegates carrying their cell phones)

One respondent wrote about the strengths and opportunities of hybrid meetings that there were “*none for now*”. Asked about the weaknesses and threats, 21 respondents explicitly marked that there were none.

The question about strengths and opportunities of hybrid meetings generated two statements from advocates of in-person meetings:

- *“It will be a serious setback for the UN Human Rights System. The use of remote participation should remain selective according to the circumstances”.*
- *“L'expérience des réunions à distance pour les membres des organes de traité pendant la pandémie a été catastrophique au plan humain, financier et sanitaire (santé mentale et physique des membres). Je ne vois donc aucun point fort à organiser toutes les réunions à distance”.*

The questions in the survey about strengths and opportunities as well as weaknesses and threats of in-person only vs. hybrid meetings led many respondents to advocate for a co-existence of both formats. While there were clearly many strong advocates for hybrid meetings and very few advocates of all-in person meetings, many respondents emphasized that both choices might be valid, depending on the purpose and context of each meeting:

- *“We have to find the balance between in-person meetings and virtual or hybrid meetings. The informative meetings could be completely hybrid or remote, those meetings that implied negotiations should be in person and if it's possible hybrid”.*
- *“I don't think ALL meetings should have the possibility of remote participation. Some should be limited to in person only if they involve things like voting, or very sensitive issues that you don't want the possibility of being shared electronically. There should be a mix of in person and hybrid.”*
- *“We will miss that in person contact and connections. But keeping remote as a possibility is mandatory, in case of emergencies, such as the virus or other threats to participants' safety”.*
- *“I think certain meetings should probably be ONLY in person if we are concerned about things like voting procedures and those cannot be guaranteed electronically. Or if we are concerned that the sensitivity of the meeting cannot be guaranteed - links could be shared etc. Some issues we don't want discussed in the broader world. But to say we would ONLY have in person meetings doesn't make sense to me. I think a mix of in person and hybrid is the way to go.”*
- *“In-person meetings are very important because online can't replace the offline meetings as we experienced during the pandemic. However, we have realized the benefits of online connections for our work. So, I wish [that] the hybrid format continues in the future”.*
- *« L'utilisation des nouvelles technologies et de l'intelligence artificielle doivent être au cœur de nos conditions de travail. C'est une question d'optimisation des moyens d'action de l'ONU . Le principe doit rester l'organisation de réunion en personne qui privilégie la qualité du travail , des échanges et de la décision. En revanche les réunions techniques, hors session , ou thématiques peuvent être organisées sur un mode hybride ou virtuel , moyen de rester en prise avec les évolutions et discussions thématiques ou stratégiques . »*

3. Conclusion and recommendations

Bringing people together in multilateral negotiation is a key feature and strength of international Geneva. This study has sought to scan latest trends under the changing post-COVID-19 pandemic circumstances and to gauge client and user needs and perspectives, in order to distill strategies on how to ensure Geneva is a hub for modern conferencing, providing the best possible conditions for multilateral encounters.

The evidence gathered in this study suggests the following take-aways:

1. Clients attach equal importance to being able to organize in-person and hybrid meetings. The type of meeting should determine the choice of the most suitable format. The trend in future events serviced at UNOG may be towards a predominantly in-person participation with the expectation to connect selected remote participants, as necessary, including on a short notice. From the clients' point of view, it would be welcome if meetings were planned by default as in-person with the hybrid option as a backup. In parallel, there will be a continued need to provide for remote observation, such as webcasting or streaming on social media, to reach wider audiences. Not catering for clients' needs in hybrid and other expanded modalities carries a significant reputational risk for the UN which would be seen as "backward" and out of touch with current developments. Conference organizers and participants have warned that Geneva may become less relevant as a conference centre and that meetings might move to cheaper and better equipped locations elsewhere.
2. Increasing travel costs and decreasing travel budgets, especially for staff travel, will mean that hybrid options have to be used if the UN and its staff wants to play an active role in multilateral processes. Hybrid modalities offer the opportunity of enormous savings on travel expenses, noting though that these savings are often on the side of participants who usually make no financial contribution to cover the cost of hybrid modalities which are borne by conference organizers. In 2022, the nearly 120 thousand online participants joining UN meetings on RSI platforms from outside Switzerland have potentially saved 277 million USD for travel. These savings are 220 times the amount paid for hybrid meetings with RSI that year. In 2023, the more than 38 thousand remote participants making use of hybrid modalities on RSI platforms joining from outside Switzerland might have saved an estimated 85 million USD from travel, 92 times the amount paid for hybrid RSI services in 2023 (pro-rated figures). In addition, the 21 thousand remote participants from outside Switzerland in Webex meetings generated saving opportunities of 50 million USD in travel costs. The savings in travel could be 190 times the amount spent on providing Webex-related services (pro-rated figures for 2023). Even if not all online participants had actually travelled to the event, hybrid modalities are worthwhile financially, as offering hybrid meeting formats pays off from as little as one, two or three participants, depending on the hybrid format, in one to five days of meetings.
3. Clients would like the GA to adopt a mandate for the provision of expanded meeting modalities, providing a much-needed legal framework to ensure that the outcomes of hybrid meetings are valid, and procedures are clarified. An overarching mandate would have to come with an appropriate budget, covering IT and AV services, including also technical moderation, so that capacities of substantive staff can be fully dedicated to achieving the desired outcomes of the meeting. To cover the needs indicated by clients and offer 58% of all RB meetings with hybrid modalities, an amount between 3.5 million USD (for use of RSI platforms) and 613'000 USD (Webex) would be required. This would be an important investment in multilateral negotiation capacities and efficiencies, the single most important feature of the UN system, in particular in Geneva.

4. UNOG is the duty station with the largest share of hybrid meetings (44%), compared to New York, Vienna and Nairobi. This is a reflection of the specific Geneva environment, where not all Member States are permanently represented and where meetings address very technical issues requiring the participation of experts. In addition, civil society is a key participant in meetings, especially around human rights issues. To ensure the seamless functioning of business operations at the duty station, meeting organizers and participants feel strongly about having a mandate in place as well as the necessary budget. A mandate could either be negotiated by the General Assembly or a relevant governing body. Geneva would lend itself as a pilot site for a mandate and budget, with available capacities to monitor implementation and record feedback and lessons learnt.
5. Clients are concerned about finding a better solution to interpretation in sessions with remote interventions (including if they are longer than 30 minutes). Hybrid participation should not result in a discrimination in terms of multilingual meeting time, they argue.
6. Conference organization is becoming more complex with more technical features requiring coordination. To be a modern conference hub, organizing a meeting should become more intuitive for clients. There is an expectation that booking a meeting is as easy (or almost as easy) as setting up a work meeting on MS Teams. Clients should have to enter meeting requests only in one place and the meetings management tool in use should accommodate frequent changes in meeting parameters, if necessary. Clients wish to have full visibility of the cost implications of their requests. Offering standard packages of meeting modalities (while being open to catering to specific requests) could reduce complexity. Service providers need to have easy access to synchronized data related to any one event. Clients would find it easier if the management of staff meeting rooms (e. g. in the H-Building) and conference rooms were streamlined, as both are de facto used for meetings with external participants.
7. Providing rapid and competent technical support and troubleshooting is key for successful meeting organization. Clients should be able to choose the platform they are most comfortable with (this choice can be narrowed to Webex and Zoom as the two platforms catered for). Clients cannot be expected to be technical experts; they have to be accompanied and guided in the use of various devices and platforms, based on their individual needs. In line with the importance that is attached to the openness of the Palais des Nations to civil society, and considering the potential reputational damage of NGO meetings that are technically run at sub-standard levels being widely publicized via electronic platforms, it seems advisable to find a solution that would allow systematically offering technical support to NGO meetings.
8. Outreach about the good conduct of meetings, including for hybrid formats, should continue and training for chairs and other key meeting organizers should be readily available.
9. Maintaining hardware and software for expanded meeting modalities is crucial for crisis preparedness; the best way to ensure both are functioning is to use them regularly. Should another pandemic or shock occur, the UN has to be ready to switch to fully remote meetings on short notice.
10. The UN has to stay abreast of developments in the events market and continuously experiment with new technologies, offering potential improvements to clients. Closely monitoring client expectations will provide useful guidance for the further evolution of conference organization in Geneva and will help to detect emerging issues that need addressing early on.

The diversification of meeting modalities is an irreversible trend. It provides new and welcome options for delegates and meeting participants to use their time more efficiently. Recent changes carry important opportunities for enhanced inclusivity and environmental sustainability. At the same time, more

coordination efforts are required on the side of meeting service providers. Some 40% of meetings have moved away. The meetings that remain are more complex to manage and involve a higher workload on the side of the organizers and service providers. To live up to the new requirements, some additional capacities may have to be created to cover emerging needs; some existing roles could possibly be repurposed. Adjusting capacities in line with current requirements will help the multilateral system to operate more efficiently overall.

Conference organization will continue to evolve beyond the pandemic context and as an organization the UN needs to be flexible and adjust its structures and processes, in line with client needs. Adjusting to the evolution in events organization might be the most important learning from the COVID-19 pandemic. If opportunities are leveraged now, the world will look to UN Geneva as a modern hub in conferencing for inspiration in future.

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Annex

Participants in interviews and focus group discussions and other contributors

In alphabetical order

Substantive secretariats

Organization	Names of interviewees
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)	Maja Andrjasevic-Boko Jamila Devi Seerathun Wan-Hea Lee Hui Lu Robert Ouko Celine Reynaud Kalpana Singh Adrian Somodean Ljiljana Stancic Irina Tabirta Kristina Vecikova
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	Lisanne Losier
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)	Nicola Koch Laurence Mancini
United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)	Silvia Mercogliano Melanie Regimbal

UN Agencies

Organization	Names of interviewees
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)	Edmund Tam Shahid Merchant
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Anne Keah Isabelle Nunez
World Health Organization (WHO)	Reja Sarkis

Permanent Missions of Member States to the United Nations in Geneva

Organization	Names of interviewees
EU Delegation	Meeting coordination: Antje Knorr
Geneva Group	Meeting coordination: Jonas Pasquier (Switzerland) and Bettina Gorczynski (USA) – co-chairs
Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and other international Organizations in Geneva	Ivan Tarutin

NGOs

Organization	Names of interviewees
HRC net/ International Service for Human Rights	Nada Awad Fabiana Leibl

Service Providers

Organization	Names of interviewees
<i>UNOG, Division of Administration</i>	
Central Support Services	Thibaut Virost
Environmental Affairs Officer	Chloë Brown
Financial Resources Management Service	Stefano Bardi
Information and Communication Technology Service	Carlos Cabrera Sandro Dessi
<i>UNOG, Division of Conference Management</i>	
Central Planning and Coordination Service	Vitali Rousak
Evaluation, Analysis and Monitoring Section	Muhammad Atiyat
Interpretation Service	Marie Diur
Languages services	Nicole Maguire
Production and Support Service	Mark Murphy

<i>UNOG, Library & Archives</i>	
	Nadia Al Droubi Fabrice Arlot Rachel Forman Sigrun Habermann Amanda Howland
<i>UNOG, Office of the Director-General</i>	
	Sophie Torelli
<i>UNOG, UN Information Service</i>	
UNTV Radio Webcast	Daniel Johnson Dominika Tomaszewska-Mortimer Philip Alexander Williams

Other

Organization	Names of interviewees
Palexpo SA	Kai Engelhardt
EHL Hospitality Business School EHL Campus Lausanne	James Chung-Yuan LIU