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Joint Inspection Unit

Enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system ([A/76/694](#)). During its consideration of the report, the Committee met online with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses dated 17 March 2022.

2. The report is submitted in response to General Assembly resolution [74/253](#), in which the Assembly urged the Secretary-General to implement the 10 recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system ([JIU/REP/2018/6](#)) in all United Nations facilities, conferences and meetings, invited the executive heads and the legislative bodies of the United Nations system organizations to address the relevant recommendations in their organizations, without prejudice to the measures taken in the framework of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, and requested the Secretary-General to submit to it, at the main part of its seventy-fifth session, a progress report on the implementation of the resolution ([A/76/694](#), para. 2).

II. Report of the Secretary-General

Progress made in enhancing accessibility

3. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that accessibility efforts by the Secretariat are guided by General Assembly resolutions [73/341](#) and [74/253](#), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy ([A/76/694](#), para. 4). In section II of the report, he



provides information on the progress made at Headquarters, offices away from headquarters and regional commissions.

4. The Secretary-General indicates that, at Headquarters, consultants conducted a review in June 2018 of the accessibility of Headquarters premises and facilities. The implementation of the plan started in 2020 and is expected to be completed in 2023 owing to delays caused by the pandemic. Improvements made include adjusting bathrooms to make them more accessible, installing power-assisted doors, creating a wheelchair-accessible entrance at street level and designing a wheelchair lift for access to the rostrum in the General Assembly Hall. With respect to documentation and meeting services, accessibility efforts included coordinating requirements, conducting outreach to users, making arrangements for accessible seating, operating the Accessibility Centre, working on raising awareness among technology providers, drafting accessible documentation and providing sign interpretation. Remote sign interpretation has been provided since 2019 using videoconference technology. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that, if mandated, additional resources would be required to include sign interpretation for all meetings, to address emerging needs such as easy-to-read and alternative text for documentation, to remediate the code of in-house systems where they are not accessible and to provide the ability to maintain a designated and professional core unit devoted to accessibility and accommodation and capable of meeting growing demand for services.

5. The Advisory Committee notes that the implementation plan of the accessibility of Headquarters premises and facilities is expected to be completed in 2023 and trusts that all the necessary measures will continue to be taken to improve the accessibility for persons with disabilities.

6. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the Office of Information and Communications Technology deployed three standard commercial platforms for virtual meetings (A/76/694, para. 10). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that communication access real-time translation services provided instantaneous translation of what was being said into a visual print display so that it could be read instead of heard. The Committee was provided with the table below on information and communications technology initiatives on accessibility and the corresponding costs.

Table

Information and communications technology initiatives on accessibility and related costs, 2019–2021

(United States dollars)

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Cost</i>
Communication access real-time translation services for meetings (calendared and non-calendared)	90 033
Website accessibility software as a service overlay	445 562
Total	535 595

7. The Advisory Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will provide a comprehensive picture of all information and communications technology-related initiatives at Headquarters for enhancing accessibility in a consolidated manner, with information disaggregated by department and initiative, together with financial implications (see paras. 20 and 34).

8. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the United Nations Office at Geneva has published a standard operating procedure on accessible meetings and

conferences on United Nations premises. Persons with disabilities are granted priority access upon arrival. For meetings, accessibility requirements are registered through the Indico tool, a meeting participants management system administered by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The website of the Office is fully accessible to persons with disabilities and provides overall guidance and information regarding accessibility (A/76/694, paras. 11–13).

9. With respect to the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Secretary-General indicates that accessibility services include webcasting and online live audio broadcast; real-time captioning; interpretation in International Sign and national sign languages; and embossing in Braille. The Office has a disability inclusion strategy action group, which identified a number of shortcomings that are being addressed under the strategic capital maintenance programme. A detailed baseline accessibility condition assessment is being carried out to study existing facilities and identify the improvements required (A/76/694, paras. 14–16).

10. The Secretary-General indicates that, in Vienna, a baseline analysis of the accessibility of the Vienna International Centre to conference participants was conducted in 2019 with the Austrian Disability Council. The findings and recommendations were shared with common service providers at the Centre. Improvements made include the installation of automatic sliding doors at all ground-level main entrances and extension of the outside ramp. Garage access points were equipped with sensors to alert people with disabilities that they are approaching the doors, and new railings, lighting and alarm systems were installed. Accessible elevators were installed in some buildings and are being installed in the rest of the Centre (A/76/694, paras. 17–19).

11. The Secretary-General notes that, at the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the project for modernizing of the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok includes several accessibility enhancements, with one conference room reopened with these new features in 2019 and the renovation of the remaining conference rooms to be completed in 2022. The ESCAP Accessibility Centre provides equipment for participants with disabilities to use while attending conferences and events. An artificial intelligence-based real-time captioning program was developed, and International Sign interpretation has also been provided wherever possible (A/76/694, paras. 20–23).

12. In respect of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Secretary-General indicates that an accessibility centre was established in December 2019, which provides transportation services for persons with disabilities, as well as equipment such as video magnifiers for the visually impaired, a Braille embosser and manual, and motorized wheelchairs. In March 2020, remote participation in all meetings and conferences held at ECA was enabled by means of a hybrid solution for conference production that included remote simultaneous interpretation. In addition, sign language and closed captioning services were provided for all major events. The Conference Centre is currently being upgraded with the installation of accessible podiums (A/76/694, paras. 24–27).

13. The Secretary-General indicates that the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has implemented standard operating procedures for accessibility and has achieved progress on an electronic workflow used for the submission of requests with related details, including accessibility requirements; the revamping of its website in line with minimum accessibility guidelines; the use of screens with sound in the elevators; and the increased use of the Indico tool for registering participants and their requirements. The Travel Unit has implemented accessibility guidelines for participants. In addition, accessibility measures have been put in place in the Main Hall and other conference rooms (A/76/694, para. 28).

14. Upon enquiry as to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Advisory Committee was informed that the report captured the current state of accessibility of conferences and meetings and that outreach would continue to all stakeholders, including ECLAC, to continuously share information and best practices.

15. The Committee was informed upon enquiry that the Secretariat did not apply any single standard to the various ongoing capital construction projects being undertaken across the Organization. Instead, applicable host country regulations and rules, or the most appropriate prevailing internationally recognized standards, were applied at each location.

16. The Advisory Committee notes the level of progress and important measures taken, as well as the lack of common approaches at Headquarters, regional commissions and other offices, for enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to develop common United Nations standards and norms on accessibility for persons with disabilities to be implemented at Headquarters, regional commissions and other offices as appropriate.

17. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Office of Human Resources in the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance was the coordinator of the present report, while the Disability Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General prepared an annual report of the Secretary-General on system-wide implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy. Human resources aspects related to disability were reported to the General Assembly in the report of the Secretary-General on an overview of human resources management reform, global strategy, while accessibility aspects in relation to conferences and meetings were reported in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, and progress on construction projects was reported in the context of annual progress reports on each individual project. The Committee was also informed that every office and department maintained a designated focal point and that, in many instances, there were multiple focal points to ensure cross-cutting coordination with all involved.

18. The Advisory Committee notes the disjointed manner in which accessibility initiatives have been undertaken across the system and reported on to the General Assembly. Given the importance of the issue, the Committee is of the view that these efforts should be conducted in a holistic manner across the Organization, under the coordination, within existing resources, of a global focal point at the highest managerial level, who would be accountable for overseeing policy development on, and implementation of, all systemwide accessibility activities.

19. The Advisory Committee further notes the need for comprehensive statistical data on persons with disabilities, including obstacles to participating in meetings and conferences, frequency of participation, and usage of technological tools, in order to ensure that accessibility solutions are responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities. The data should also include information on measures already implemented, those currently under implementation and those yet to be implemented, together with related financial implications and lessons learned.

20. While noting the current mandated reporting mechanisms, the Advisory Committee considers that the Secretary-General should also submit a consolidated report to the General Assembly which provides a complete picture of systemwide accessibility initiatives and gathers information in related areas such as information and communications technology, personnel matters,

conference management, procurement and construction, both at Headquarters and in United Nations entities across the system (see para. 34).

Status of implementation of the recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit

21. In section III of his report, the Secretary-General provides information on the status of implementation of the 10 recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit.

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should task the relevant offices with developing, by the end of 2020, a draft policy on the accessibility of conferences and meetings for persons with disabilities, as well as guidelines for policy implementation, and present them to their respective legislative bodies, should the endorsement of those bodies be required for the policy to take effect.

22. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the Secretariat is developing guidelines on the accessibility of United Nations conferences and meetings for persons with disabilities, to be aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy. In the Convention, four key areas are identified: the physical environment; transportation; information and communications; and other facilities and services open to the public. In the guidelines on the accessibility of United Nations conferences and meetings, accessibility will be recognized as a fundamental human right and as the responsibility of everyone. The guidelines will also provide that accessibility checks should be carried out and requirements verified for conferences held outside Headquarters, and that all information and communications should be accessible to persons with disabilities. In order to implement the guidelines, various actions will need to be undertaken, including measures to ensure that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. Statistical data and other appropriate information will need to be collected in order to identify and address the accessibility barriers faced by persons with disabilities and ensure accessibility for such persons. One or more focal points will need to be designated for matters relating to the implementation of the guidelines ([A/76/694](#), paras. 29–37).

Recommendation 2

For all major conferences that are hosted off the premises of United Nations system organizations, the executive heads of these organizations should ensure that accessibility requirements are clearly stipulated in individual agreements concluded with the hosting entity for specific conferences and meetings.

23. The Secretary-General indicates that the Secretariat works with its host country counterparts to ensure that accessibility requirements are reflected in the host country agreement, which stipulates the requirements for conference rooms, facilities and services, including the provision of ramps for wheelchairs, accessible seating, assistive devices and related tools. The Office of Legal Affairs provides advice and support, including appropriate text for provisions on accessibility for inclusion by the United Nations and host countries. The venue in the host country is determined by the Government and the Secretariat office or department organizing the event ([A/76/694](#), paras. 38–39). The Committee was informed upon enquiry that, for major conferences held away from headquarters, accessibility requirements were specified in the host country agreements and assessed on-site prior to the conferences. Should there be compliance issues, consultations would be held with the host Governments, and the venue could be declined if the requirements could not be met.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should appoint, by December 2021, a focal point on accessibility within their organization under terms of reference that clearly define the focal point's role and responsibilities as regards enhancing the accessibility of conferences and meetings for persons with disabilities.

24. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the Disability Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General coordinates the system-wide focal point network for the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, which was established in June 2019. The network comprises focal points from across the United Nations system. The Department of Operational Support and the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance coordinate the network. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management plays an active role given its lead on conference planning, documentation, interpretation, meetings support and the provision of technical secretariat services and the Accessibility Centre. In 2019, a Disability Inclusion Team was established at the United Nations Office at Geneva, and focal points for accessibility have also been appointed at the United Nations Offices at Vienna and Geneva and in the regional commissions (A/76/694, paras. 40–42). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the Disability Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General provided technical support to entities implementing the Strategy, developed key tools and resources mandated by the Strategy and coordinated an entity-wide focal point network.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should instruct relevant offices that address accessibility-related matters to develop, by December 2021, standard operating procedures with regard to their operational responsibilities to improve the accessibility of conferences and meetings for persons with disabilities.

25. The Secretary-General indicates that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management reflects the subject of accessibility to conference services in the Compendium of Administrative Policies, Practices and Procedures of Technical Secretariat Services, Protocol and Liaison Services and Conference Services. The 2021 update of the Compendium covers access to conference facilities, seating arrangements, meetings, information and electronic documentation. In 2019, the United Nations Office at Geneva developed and published on its website a comprehensive standard operating procedure on the organization of accessible meetings and conferences. ESCAP also has an operational guide on disability-inclusive meetings (A/76/694, paras. 43–46).

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should make it mandatory for organizers of meetings and conferences to ensure, by December 2021, that: (a) the participation of persons with disabilities is fully supported by registration processes that are accessible for persons with diverse disabilities; (b) clauses are included in accessible registration forms to ask specifically about accessibility requirements; (c) information on accessible facilities and services is disseminated to all potential participants through accessible websites and information notes; and (d) accessible post-conference and post-meeting satisfaction surveys consistently include questions to assess satisfaction with the accessibility of facilities and services.

26. The Secretary-General indicates that, at Headquarters, an online request form was launched in the first quarter of 2020 to facilitate requests for services and accessibility requirements for meetings. In Geneva, the registration process in Indico is being improved and the website is tested using screen readers, while further work

is being conducted to find solutions to elements of the website that are not compatible with the readers. The Conference Management Service at the United Nations Office at Vienna has encouraged secretariats to request information on accessibility needs in conference registration forms to better understand the requirements of meeting attendees and encourage participation (A/76/694, paras. 47–51).

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by December 2021, provide the option for remote participation in all meetings and conferences that they organize, with no prejudice to the efforts to make attendance at meetings and conferences accessible to persons with disabilities.

27. Since May 2020, the Secretariat, at Headquarters, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, has implemented remote participation in meetings held during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (virtual and hybrid meetings) using remote simultaneous interpretation and platforms that are fully accessible to persons with disabilities as a business continuity measure. If remote participation were desired as a permanent feature, a specific mandate from Member States and the appropriation of the associated funding would be necessary (A/76/694, paras. 52–53). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the provision of remote simultaneous interpretation as a business continuity measure and in line with the relevant recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit did not address the overall question of the definition of a virtual meeting and its related rules of procedure once such a measure ended, which was a decision for the intergovernmental bodies to make.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should issue instructions to information and communications technology and facilities management offices to undertake periodic accessibility assessments of organizational facilities and services for conferences and meetings, and to ensure that organizations of persons with disabilities are adequately consulted at all stages of the process.

28. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that Headquarters is in the process of implementing a three-year plan of accessibility improvements resulting from an assessment conducted in 2018. It is expected that the plan will be completed in 2023, following some delays resulting from the pandemic. A funding request to conduct an assessment of the accessibility of the Headquarters premises will be included in the regular budget submission for 2024. The Disability Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General published guidelines on consultation with persons with disabilities in August 2021 (A/76/694, paras. 54–55).

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should task procurement offices with drafting, by December 2021, provisions for incorporating accessibility checks and/or requirements into procurement policies and guidelines for consideration and adoption by the relevant decision-making authority.

29. The Procurement Network of the High-level Committee on Management, with support from the Disability Team in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, published guidelines on disability inclusion for procurement in November 2020. The Procurement Division's external website has been upgraded to include new accessibility features. The Secretariat has adopted the definition of disability-inclusive suppliers and included it in its outreach described in the Vendor Outreach Standard Operating Procedure issued in January 2021. Through the implementation of e-tendering, the Organization is working towards making the procurement procedures and documents accessible for persons with disabilities (A/76/694, paras. 56–62).

30. In paragraph 63 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that, with regard to meeting the requirements under indicator 8 (“Target is established and met for number/percentage of relevant procurement documents that have accessibility as a mandatory requirement”), the approval of the General Assembly would be needed. The current procurement framework mandated by the Assembly does not specifically allow for social considerations in the development of the procurement strategies under which disability-inclusive procurement practices would fall.

Recommendation 9

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should develop and implement through relevant inter-agency mechanisms, by December 2021, a common system-wide mandatory specialized training module on disability inclusion and accessibility for personnel involved directly or indirectly in the servicing of conferences and meetings, including, but not limited to, staff in conference management, facilities and services management, human resources management, and procurement, legal, information and communications technology, medical, public information and safety and security services.

31. The Office of Human Resources will shortly be rolling out a newly designed disability inclusion course to contribute to building in the Secretariat a working environment that is inclusive of and welcoming for persons with disabilities by enhancing awareness and understanding among personnel of disability and working with persons with disabilities (A/76/694, para. 64).

Recommendation 10

The legislative bodies of United Nations system organizations should include in their agendas the review of periodic reports submitted to them on the state of accessibility of conference and meeting facilities and services for persons with disabilities, including the state of progress of actions to address accessibility deficits.

32. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that this recommendation is addressed to the legislative bodies. In the case of the United Nations, the Secretary-General will be providing regular reporting as requested by the General Assembly (A/76/694, para. 65).

33. The Advisory Committee requested but did not receive information on the views of the Joint Inspection Unit regarding the status of implementation of its recommendations. **The Committee trusts that the information regarding the implementation of the recommendations will be reflected in future reports as appropriate.**

III. Conclusion

34. In paragraph 67 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the General Assembly may wish to take note of the present report. **Taking into account its comments and observations above, the Advisory Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to submit, at the main part of its seventy-seventh session, a consolidated report on efforts, including systemwide, to enhance accessibility for persons with disabilities, including information on the designation of a global focal point, statistical data, policy development, information and communications technology-related initiatives, related personnel matters, including the recruitment of persons with disabilities, and detailed financial implications (see paras. 7, 16, 18, 19 and 20).** The Advisory Committee intends to review this matter further in the context of the proposed programme budget for 2023 and the proposed budgets of construction projects.