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Pattern of conferences

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Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1.   The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/68/122) and on the paper-smart concept (A/68/123). In addition, the Advisory Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2013 (A/68/32), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I. During its consideration of the reports, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses received on 14 October 2013.

2.   The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, which was submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 67/237 and other relevant mandates, contains information on conference management issues as well as initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat to improve the quality of conference services provided to Member States. Additional statistical data supplementary to the report were made available on the website of the Committee on Conferences.[1] The report of the Secretary-General on the paper-smart concept was submitted in compliance with the request made by the Assembly in resolution 67/237 (sect. IV, para. 21) that the Secretary-General elaborate the scope of the paper-smart concept so that it becomes a more comprehensive concept based on the use of modern technology in order to better serve Member States, bearing in mind the principle of language parity among the six official languages of the United Nations, and to report thereon to the Assembly at its sixty-eighth session.

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[1] http://coc.dgacm.org/2013/Documents/2013_Supplementary_Information.pdf.

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II. Pattern of conferences

A. Meetings management

Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

3.   According to the information supplementary to the report, the overall utilization factor for meetings for all four duty stations remained constant, with 84 per cent in 2012 and 85 per cent in both 2011 and 2010. Specifically, New York had a utilization factor of 79 per cent in 2012, as compared to 82 per cent in 2011 and 81 per cent in 2010; Geneva had a utilization factor of 93 per cent in 2012, as compared to 90 per cent in 2011 and 91 per cent in 2010; Nairobi had a utilization factor of 92 per cent in 2012, as compared to 89 per cent in 2011 and 88 per cent in 2010; and Vienna had a utilization factor of 89 per cent in both 2012 and 2011, as compared to 93 per cent in 2010.

4.   As detailed in the supplementary information, for the past 10 years, 10 intergovernmental bodies had an average utilization factor below the benchmark of 80 per cent.[2] In New York in 2012, three intergovernmental bodies (the Committee on Information, the Committee on Contributions and the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund) had utilization factors below the benchmark of 80 per cent for three consecutive years, while two entities that previously fell below the benchmark improved their utilization rates to over 80 per cent in 2012: the Statistical Commission improved to 86 per cent and the Commission for Social Development improved to 81 per cent. In Geneva, the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees improved its utilization rate to 84 per cent. In Nairobi and Vienna no intergovernmental bodies fell below the benchmark (A/68/122, paras. 9-10). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had analysed the 10-year pattern of the bodies holding meetings in New York and was continuing to work closely with the six intergovernmental bodies whose utilization factor had fallen below the benchmark of 80 per cent (A/68/122, para. 11). The Department had suggested to those bodies that consideration be given to reducing future meeting requests in order to improve their utilization rates. The Committee was informed that positive responses had been received and the results of those consultations would be reported in 2014.

5.   **While the Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts made, it reiterates its concern over the slow progress made in increasing the utilization rates of conference-servicing resources and facilities. The Committee looks forward to reporting of substantial and sustainable improvements in the Secretary-General's next report on the pattern of conferences.**

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[2] The Statistical Commission; the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations; the United Nations Children's Fund, Executive Board; the Commission for Social Development; the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; the Commission on Population and Development; the Committee on Contributions; the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations; the Committee on Information; and the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization.

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required"

6.   The Secretary-General states in paragraph 18 of his report that the number of requests accommodated for the provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required" in New York has sharply increased: 687 requested and 664 provided in 2012; 577 requested and 553 provided in 2011; and 392 requested and 370 provided in 2010. The Advisory Committee notes that this increase took place without additional resources. **The Committee welcomes the improved efficiencies using existing resources.**

Utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

7.   According to the report of the Secretary-General, in 2009 the utilization rate stood at 76 per cent; in both 2010 and 2011 it was 70 per cent (see A/67/523, para. 6); and in 2012 the rate dropped by 8 per cent to 62 per cent (A/68/122, para. 21). Notwithstanding the efforts made by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), under the general guidance of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, including a marketing strategy and various local and international appeals to reverse the long-standing underutilization of its conference facilities, the utilization rate of the ECA conference facilities continued to decrease during the reporting period.

8.   Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that a 50-50 balance between income generation and recurrent and direct costs incurred would be considered a minimal viable economic threshold. The Committee notes that the threshold calculation does not include indirect costs. Furthermore, a recently conducted pricing structure report found that the centre's pricing was below the current standard pricing structure of most of the meeting venues in Addis Ababa. The Committee was informed that, as a result, ECA would commission a comprehensive analysis and review study of the pricing and marketing strategy of the centre, to be reported by the end of December 2013 and implemented at the beginning of the biennium 2014-2015.

9.   **While the Advisory Committee acknowledges the initiatives undertaken, it reiterates its increasing concern over the continuing and substantial decline in the centre's utilization rate from 76 per cent in 2009 to 62 per cent in 2012, in particular with a view to achieving the stated aims of the long-term financial sustainability and economic viability of the centre. In this connection, the Committee considers that the 50-50 formula for income generation and costs should also include indirect costs in order to ensure full costing and risk assessment. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly keep the matter under close review and requests the Secretary-General, in his next report on the pattern of conferences, to present alternative options for the future if a noticeable reversal of the underutilization trend of the ECA conference centre is not indicated during the biennium 2014-2015.**

B. Integrated global management of conference services

Conference management

10.   In his report, the Secretary-General underlines the need to delineate lines of responsibility between the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi for conference management policies, operations and resource utilization. He also notes that the related changes will be discussed at the four duty stations and in other Secretariat departments with a view to reporting results to the Assembly at its sixty-ninth session (A/68/122, paras. 29-30). In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls its comments in its previous report (A/67/523, paras. 8-9) on the importance it attaches to the authority and accountability of the Under-Secretary-General in the management of all the resources under section 2 of the budget and notes that the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to complete the internal reviews concerning accountability mechanisms and the clear delineation of responsibility between the Under-Secretary-General and the Directors General (resolution 67/237, sect. III, para. 2). In its previous report, the Committee requested that the Secretary-General finalize the amendments to the Secretary-General's bulletins on the organization of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna to delineate and codify the dual responsibility of the Under-Secretary-General and the respective Directors General in relation to conference management. The Assembly endorsed this request and asked the Secretary-General to report thereon to the Assembly at its sixty-eighth session (see resolution 67/237). During the hearings, the Committee was informed that discussions were to take place at the end of October 2013 and that it was anticipated that the roles of the Under-Secretary-General and the three Directors General would be delineated by the end of 2013.

11.   **The Advisory Committee welcomes this development and requests that a status update on this matter be provided to the General Assembly at the time of consideration of the present report. The Committee recommends that the Secretary-General be requested to report in detail on the delineation of responsibility within the Organization in his next report on the pattern of conferences.**

Proximity rule

12.   The Secretary-General notes that the proximity rule is a shorthand for the cumulative efforts by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management duty stations to achieve the most efficient servicing package for meetings held away from their designated headquarters, including, but not limited to, minimizing travel costs (A/68/122, para. 31). The Advisory Committee recalls that for the biennium 2010-2011, savings amounted to $1.1 million (A/67/523, para. 12), while savings accrued in 2012 amounted to about $800,000 (A/68/122, para. 31).

13.   **The Advisory Committee requests that a breakdown of the actual savings achieved in 2012 under the regular budget be shared with the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the present report. Furthermore, the Committee believes that the application of the rule is determined by factors in addition to proximity. Therefore, referring to it as the "proximity rule" is misleading and the Secretary-General should consider renaming it appropriately.**

C. Matters related to documentation and publications

Digitization

14. Paragraphs 51 to 55 of the Secretary-General's report relate to the digitization of older United Nations documents. The Secretary-General notes that of 17 million older United Nations documents, an estimated 20 per cent, or 3.7 million documents, need to be digitized. The estimated in-house completion time frame for this project is at least 20 years. The Department of Public Information, which is responsible for the digitization of old documents and records, including photos, press releases, internal audit reports and performance reports, estimates that to process all of the remaining 3.7 million important documents issued prior to the creation of the Official Document System (ODS) within five years would cost $9 million (see A/68/122, paras. 51-55).

15. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the forecasted 20-year time frame for the scanning project was lengthy because older documents were bound in books, many of which were in fragile condition. In many cases only one paper copy of a document might exist. The Committee was further informed that the output was therefore determined more by the status of the paper copy than by the speed of the scanner.

16. **The Advisory Committee expresses concern that the anticipated lengthy digitization project of United Nations documents may jeopardize the retention of historical knowledge and information in view of the delicate state and risk of breakage of many of the related documents. The Committee trusts that the project will continue uninterrupted and that the scanning of those fragile documents will be prioritized. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General, in his next report on the pattern of conferences, to report on the status of the project, with options, including for its possible acceleration.**

Documents management

17. Details of the management of official documents are provided in paragraphs 44 to 50 of the report of the Secretary-General. In 2012 the overall timely submission rate was 88 per cent at United Nations Headquarters (unchanged from 2011);[3] 85 per cent at the United Nations Office at Geneva (2011: 74 per cent); 60 per cent at the United Nations Office at Vienna (unchanged from 2011); and 5 per cent at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (2011: zero per cent). In 2012 the rate of timely submission was 60 per cent at United Nations Headquarters (2011: 76 per cent); 43 per cent in Geneva (2011: 45 per cent); and zero per cent in both Vienna and Nairobi (unchanged for both since 2011) (see A/67/523, para. 16, and A/68/122, para. 44). A list of 2012 submission compliance by department is contained in the report's supplementary information (see sect. VII), which is available on the aforementioned website of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The Advisory Committee notes that 30 departments submitted their

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[3] The overall timely submission rate is defined as the percentage of manuscripts submitted to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management by author departments and offices before or on the agreed-upon slotting date. The 90 per cent benchmark was established by the Secretary-General and is contained in his annual compacts with all Heads of Department and Office (A/68/122, footnote 8).

documents on time, while 55 departments were below the 90 per cent benchmark. The Committee was informed that the heads of the departments/offices were accountable to the Secretary-General for timely submission of slotted documents and that submission timeliness was reflected in senior managers' annual compact.

18. Upon request, the Advisory Committee was informed that, with regard to compliance at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the low rate was a result of the Governing Council secretariat's reviewing substantive documents up to the final weeks preceding the Council meeting. The Committee was also informed that the United Nations Office at Nairobi was holding consultations with submitting offices before and after the meetings to draw lessons from each experience and to provide assistance to clients in forecasting and submitting documents in a more timely manner. The Committee was further informed that those efforts had resulted in a projected Nairobi compliance rate of 22 per cent for 2013.

19. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts made thus far to improve the timeliness of document submission in Nairobi and looks forward to further improvements in future. Nonetheless, the Committee continues to regret that overall document submission rates among duty stations have remained below the targeted compliance rate. The Committee reiterates its request that the Secretary-General address the matter expeditiously and present concrete ways to reverse the low compliance rate in the next report on the pattern of conferences (see also A/67/523, para. 16).**

20. With regard to timely document issuance, the Secretary-General states that high priority is given to the documents of the Fifth Committee (A/68/122, para. 45). He indicates that for the main part of the Fifth Committee's deliberations during the sixty-seventh session, 22 documents were issued as mandated (6 weeks before their consideration); 11 documents were issued four weeks in advance and 18 were issued at least two weeks before being considered. The Advisory Committee notes that the remaining 26 documents were issued less than two weeks before the respective meeting (A/68/122, para. 45). In this connection, with regard to the delay in the recent issuance of the Committee's First report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 (A/68/7), the Committee regrets that, upon enquiry, no satisfactory explanation was provided by the Secretariat. **In this regard, the Committee also requests that the reasons for the delayed issuance of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 (A/68/7) be shared with the General Assembly at the time of consideration of the present report. In future, the Committee expects that due priority will be given to the timely issuance of all reports emanating from the Advisory Committee.**

21. **The Advisory Committee trusts that efforts will continue to be made to ensure the timely publication of documents in order to allow Member States adequate time to prepare for scheduled meetings. The Committee therefore requests that the Secretary-General (a) identify and analyse any systemic bottlenecks causing the delayed issuance of reports and (b) implement practical solutions to avoid future delays. The Committee requests that these measures be detailed in the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

D. Matters related to translation and interpretation

22. In paragraphs 58 to 65, the Secretary-General covers matters related to translation and interpretation and states that agreements are now in place between the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and the International Association of Conference Translators (AITC) (A/68/122, para. 58). According to the Secretary-General, both agreements are valid for five years, align the remuneration of short-term interpreters and translators with that of regular staff and use existing mechanisms, such as post adjustment multipliers and the United Nations official rate of exchange.

23. The General Assembly has repeatedly requested that the Secretary-General, when recruiting temporary language service staff, ensure that all language services are given equal treatment and are provided with equally favourable working conditions and resources, with full respect for the specificities of each of the six official languages and taking into account their respective workloads (resolution 67/237, sect. V, para. 3).

24. In this connection, during its consideration of the matter, the Advisory Committee requested information concerning the amount spent in New York in 2013 for international temporary assistance for translation, by language, but was not provided with a clear response. **The Advisory Committee recommends that the Secretariat provide the details concerning the amounts expended on international temporary assistance for translation in New York in 2013, by language, to the General Assembly during its upcoming consideration of the present report.**

25. **While the Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts that have resulted in the above-mentioned agreements with AIIC and AITC, it trusts that compliance with these agreements, Staff Regulations of the United Nations and Staff Rules, and the relevant United Nations human resources and other polices and instructions is strictly adhered to in connection with the hiring, administration and management of temporary assistance for translation and interpretation. Furthermore, the Committee reiterates its recommendation that any savings and/or efficiencies arising from the increased use of contractual translation must not come at the expense of quality and timeliness of services.**

26. With regard to longer-term staffing needs and succession planning in the area of language services, the Secretary-General indicates that an 18-month rolling examination schedule has been introduced to help meet the needs of individual language occupational groups for timely examinations in order to address planned and unplanned staff turnover (A/68/122, para. 59). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Office of Human Resources Management had organized 36 language examinations in the last five years and that, as a result, 324 candidates had been placed on the roster. The Secretary-General states that, in 2012, 90 interns were hosted in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and that about 110 former interns and trainees who passed a freelance test are now eligible for temporary recruitment.

27. The Advisory Committee was informed that qualified language candidates were often identified through the unpaid United Nations internship programme and through university outreach activities. In this connection, language staff of the

Department visited 45 universities under a signed memorandum of understanding, in order to meet with faculty and to provide language training to students (A/68/122, para. 65). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the Department continued to pursue an outreach programme in support of its succession planning exercises. Specifically, with regard to outreach to African universities, the Committee was informed that the "African project" was aimed at establishing post-graduate university programmes in translation, conference interpreting and public service interpreting through centres of excellence on the African continent and that, after the second Pan-African Conference in 2012, five universities had signed a memorandum of understanding, while other initiatives had also taken hold.[4]

28. **In this connection the Advisory Committee recalls its comments in the context of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 on succession planning and on maintaining outreach to universities to promote the pursuit of language careers worldwide (see A/68/7, chap. II, part I, sect. 2, paras. I.118-119). The Committee requests that the Secretary-General, in the context of his next report on the pattern of conferences, provide an overview of the outreach objectives reached and of plans on how to bring a wider group of educational institutions on board, in particular in regions that have been poorly represented. With regard to future staffing needs and succession planning, the Committee requests that details be shared with the General Assembly at the time of consideration of the present report, on how many of the 324 rostered candidates (see above) have to date been offered a language position, and how the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management plans to fill anticipated vacancies as a result of upcoming retirements over the biennium 2014-2015.**

III. Paper-smart concept

29. The General Assembly, in section IV, paragraph 21, of its resolution 67/237, requested the Secretary-General to elaborate the scope of the paper-smart concept to better serve Member States, bearing in mind the principle of language parity among the six official languages of the United Nations, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixty-eighth session, including detailed information on (a) technological benchmarks, including but not limited to data security and services provided to Member States, (b) implications for financial and human resources and budgetary and procurement procedures, (c) implementation time frames at the four main duty stations, (d) integration of the related information and communications technology projects with Umoja, (e) business continuity plans, (f) possible training needs, (g) availability of the paper-smart portal and (h) accessibility for persons with disabilities.

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4 Memorandums of understanding were signed by: Ain Shams University — Al Alsun, Cairo; the University of Buea — Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters; the University of Ghana — Legon, Accra; the Universidade Pedagógica, Maputo; and the University of Nairobi. Furthermore, a Master's course in conference interpreting was introduced at the University of Ghana in August 2012. Another training centre in Cameroon, the Institut Supérieur de Traduction et d'Interprétation de Yaoundé, is also part of the African project. Other universities taking steps to join include: the Université de Ouagadougou, which is planning to introduce conference interpreting courses in January 2014, in collaboration with the Université Senghor d'Alexandrie (Egypt) and with the support of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie.

30.   In his report on the paper-smart concept (A/68/123), the Secretary-General notes that the concept was developed within existing resources and will be integrated with Umoja upon its implementation. He summarizes the guiding principles of the concept as follows: to make paper copies of documents always available; to ensure that technical solutions are globally compatible; to support multilingualism, including the simultaneous distribution of documents; to ensure security of information and guarantee business continuity in order to provide members of delegations in meeting rooms, and elsewhere, for instance in national capitals, with easy access to all documents and relevant information regarding any official meetings (A/68/123, paras. 4-5). The paper-smart concept is based on four components: (a) a web-based portal; (b) printing on demand; (c) e-publishing; and (d) portable media solutions. An overview of progress made, including lessons learned from pilot meetings, is set out in paragraphs 6 to 14 of the report of the Secretary-General.

31.   Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the paper-smart concept provided the same documents electronically as were currently provided as paper copies. Furthermore, all pre-session and in-session documents provided on the paper-smart portal were taken from the ODS via a link. The only documents not taken from ODS were statements delivered by delegates, which are either received electronically from the respective Member States via e-mail or scanned from hard copies. Regarding the risk of unauthorized or unofficial changes to electronic documents, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that if the content of a document was changed without authorization on ODS, such a change would automatically be reflected on the paper-smart portal via the link to the System. The paper-smart team restricted the number of staff members authorized to upload documents to the portal. An audit trail was in place as an additional level of control.

32.   As to the organizational challenges relating to the introduction of the paper-smart concept, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that in 2013 and 2014 conference services in New York would be challenged by (1) the fact that conference facilities in New York were being provided in two locations (the Conference Building and the North Lawn Building), with different technical infrastructures; (2) new conference technologies requiring considerable training of staff and (3) staff of the Meetings Servicing Unit being required to provide two types of services, that is, traditional and the new paper-smart services. Furthermore, the Committee was informed that the staff of the Meetings Servicing Unit in New York had been reduced from 43 to 36 (16 per cent) in 2013.

33.   **The Advisory Committee recognizes that the paper-smart concept has the potential to achieve greater transparency, more efficient and effective document dissemination and more reliable information flow. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request that the Secretary-General ensure the quality and authenticity of electronic documents, with an appropriate document control oversight mechanism. The Committee also stresses the importance of making available paper documents, as needed, taking into account the relevant provisions of Assembly resolution 57/300, in which the Assembly called for adequate internal capacity for the provision of hard copies requested by Member States (see A/67/523, para. 19). The Committee also recommends that the Secretary-General be requested to include an update on the ongoing implementation of the concept in the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

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