

You say presential, I say virtual



This May, the OIE will hold its 88th General Session (88 GS), and this will be a GS with a difference – our first ever fully virtual one!

Challenges of hosting a virtual event

In the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns, most intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) have had to face the challenge of hosting a large-scale virtual event, with some being more successful than others. Eye on Global Transparency published a [review](#) of the first virtual IGO meetings that took place during the initial lockdowns last year. And it is clear from this review that the process was not easy, even for larger intergovernmental organisations, notably the United Nations.

With this in mind, OIE Direction reviewed the lessons learned from last year's hybrid GS and established a General Session Steering Committee (GSSC) comprised of relevant representatives from departments, units and regions, and chaired by Chief of Staff **François Caya**. What was the key to approaching this challenge? According to François, it was to 'totally change your mindset'. Although the objective of the GS remains the same – to hold an institutional meeting and adopt resolutions – we need to convert this to the virtual space in a much tighter timeline.

Mara Gonzalez Ortiz, Head of the Events Coordination Unit, and a member of the GSSC, also noted these challenges, particularly regarding time. ECU's usual timeline for the GS 'begins in June/July for a GS taking place the following May – this year, the timeline began in November'. And while this has led to increased workload, Mara emphasised that she has a very good team in place who have had to learn quickly in the face of the pandemic but who have adapted well and will continued to do so to deliver a seamless outcome for 88 GS.

For our colleagues in the Communication Department, who are often some of the first in, and the last out at the GS, this virtual General Session will be relatively painless. **Paula Pinet** characterised Comm's experience at the General Session as being like a load of 'crazy bees' buzzing around Maison de la chimie for the week. **Lucía Escati** noted that the Communication Department's General Session, in the virtual world, would be much less stressful. No more racing around trying to get messages validated, published on social media, recording interviews, etc. But she will miss the cocktails – won't we all... If we want to remember the buzz of the GS of old – with or without the crazy bees – we can all take a nostalgic trip via [YouTube](#).

Montserrat Arroyo, Head of the Regional Activities Department, also a member of the GSSC, commented on how her team's work has changed over the past year, with the Regional Commission Conferences for the Americas, Europe and Africa last September and November, and in February 2021, being transformed to virtual events. 'Active participation of the audience, particularly exchanges with Delegates, was one of our main objectives' she noted, 'This engagement and active participation was achieved by creating a collaborative space where exchanges were encouraged.'

Practicalities

First off, a virtual conference platform that would serve the needs not just of the GS but also for the first time, of pre-GS webinars needed to be identified, and luckily the GSSC with sizeable input from the Events Coordination Unit and the Digital Transformation and Information Services Department found one that met our needs.

We are not going to be able to replicate everything from the GS of old – so no coffee breaks, no cocktails (a minute's silence for cocktails everyone please) – but there is no harm in focusing on the main aims of this institutional event – passing resolutions, voting, etc. – rather than on the bells and whistles. I recently spoke to a friend who attended a climate change event at which the organisers took great pains to replicate the conference venue, the experience of arriving at the building navigating your way to the room, trying to find your seat – all the things surely that you don't miss about attending events.

So, you're not all going to get virtual headsets, but the GSSC does want to ensure that attendees are engaged and that a social aspect is maintained. So this year, in the lead up to the GS, there will be pre-GS information webinars allowing for an open dialogue between Members and Specialist Commissions. The work completed by the Specialist Commissions will be presented as well as what will be proposed for adoption. Members have met this initiative enthusiastically as it allows for a more inclusive exchange prior to the big event and it is highly likely to be kept in the future.

The GS itself, excepting elections, will be webcast allowing the OIE's mission to be spread to a wider audience, including the private sector. And the more transparent we are with the private sector regarding our vision, mission and motives, the greater the understanding and confidence will be built between the two. The Communication Dept has set up a new dedicated Twitter channel 'OIE for Members' which will target Members and all those already in the OIE network; all messages around 88 GS will be channelled to the relevant audience. And as part of the OIE community, you are invited to follow @OIEforMembers which is up and running now!

Internet issues

It is also key to plan for what might go wrong – just in case. As we will all be working remotely, what if someone's Internet connection drops at the crucial moment? Back-up personnel need to be available for all OIE staff working during the GS, be that for those monitoring the chat, counting the number of countries, or whatever.

With regard to voting, **François** notes that the OIE is 'being very innovative, allowing Members to vote using their mouse, fully online – a first for standard-setting organisations'. But with great innovation, comes great responsibility -- good Internet connections are important not only for OIE staff but for Delegates and all participants, and in some parts of the world, this is a particular challenge. The OIE will therefore provide content suitable for low bandwidths and has advised Delegates, when needed, to seek out national offices with good Internet connections from which to attend (local WHO or FAO offices or other Ministries such as Defence or Health).

Future

And our **Chief of Staff** emphasises that this is not a one-off, from next year, both presential and virtual modalities will be available for GS attendance. This fully virtual session has allowed us to democratise the process. Not all Members have the money to send Delegates to Paris every year, and as we all know, when they get here, the cost of food and accommodation also adds up. In addition to democratising the process, we are combatting climate change by decreasing the need for air travel. And this was evidenced when the world went into lockdown and life as we knew it – frequent flyer miles and all – stopped. As stated in a recent [Nature article](#), carbon dioxide emissions worldwide decreased by between 17 and 25 % due to lockdown by early April 2020, largely due to reduced flights. **Mara** has noted this too, with OIE Travel bookings in 2020 being approximately 20% of the 2019 total, the environment was certain to benefit.

Mara also noted that what has been especially helpful is what ECU learned over the past year when travel and events came to a near standstill worldwide. She and her team used this period to learn about hosting virtual events and built up a bank of best practices which will be shared in the forthcoming Events Organisation Portal in the summer, along with all relevant information, such as IT tips, guides, etc., allowing you to request ECU or Communication support, making the service as automated as possible, sharing her team's expertise while empowering the user. Win-win!

In terms of the future, **Gerrit Beger**, Head of the Communication Department and another GSSC member, says Comm will keep its dedicated Twitter channel OIE for Members for OIE-network specific messages, and the main Twitter channel for broader message to engage a more general audience on the OIE's mission and vision.

When thinking of the future, **Montse** mused that it is impossible to completely replace the warmth and chemistry of in-person meetings but that the virtual nature of RAD meetings has meant that over 98% of Delegates have been able to participate. She proudly noted that the OIE has proved its ability 'to adapt and respond to changing work situations and environments, while always ensuring to provide support to its Members'.

So what is clear is that the pandemic has levelled the playing field in many ways. The cost of travel or accommodation is no longer prohibitive to attendance. We will definitely learn from this experience, and one thing is for sure, it is making the OIE a more transparent, inclusive organisation, embracing our new world with open arms virtual or otherwise, and that can only be for the good.

More information:

88th General Session 2021 - Planning a virtual General Session, PPT presentation by François Caya.

We wish to thank our colleagues Montserrat Arroyo, Gerrit Beger, François Caya, Lucía Escati, Mara Gonzalez Ortiz and Paula Pinet for their valuable contributions and Lucy Hogan for writing this article for the OIE In-house Times.

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