The first 100% virtual OIE General Session in review

Some reflections from our colleagues

'Congratulations on the excellent organisation.'
'Very well organised and managed.'
'Liked the eco-friendly side of the GS, however face-to-face interaction and communication between the delegates and staff was missing.'
Quotes taken from the 88th OIE GS Post-Event Evaluation Questionnaire by the Events Coordination Unit (ECU)

What worked? What didn't? What were some of the lessons learnt? How could we improve for future sessions? Colleagues from several departments offer their post-General Session reflections in this collaborative review.

Gillian Mylrea, Head of Standards Department, on the Aquatic Animals Health Standards Commission (Aquatic Animals Commission, AAHSC) and the Terrestrial Animal Health Standards Code Commission (Terrestrial Code Commission, TAHSCC)

The virtual General Session (GS) format demanded a lot more time and effort over several months from Commission members, especially from the Presidents, as well as OIE Secretariats. Thanks to everyone's commitment, the success of the various activities was ensured. A success that was notably owed thorough planning (e.g. run-sheet) and proficient chairing during the GS by the OIE President Dr Mark Schipp, supported by the DDG ISS Dr Matthew Stone, and the Specialist Commission Presidents, Dr Ingo Ernst (AAHSC) and Dr Etienne Bonbon (TAHSCC). Below is a list of the various activities and reflections on each of them:

- **Pre-GS videos by the Presidents -** Although both Commission Presidents made the requested videos, they were not convinced of the videos' value, questioning whether this was a good use of their time given the work involved. It would be good to get feedback to assess the return on effort for these.

- **Pre-GS webinars** - many Members attended the pre-GS webinars conducted by the Commission members to present the texts to be proposed for adoption. We believe this provided Members with an easy way to 'digest' and better understand the information that might otherwise have been lost in the lengthy Commission reports. The value of these webinars, from the Members' perspective, should be explored to improve the level of their engagement in the standard-setting process.
- **Pre-GS invitation to submit positions on texts to be proposed for adoption** – this was a good initiative that helped the Presidents to anticipate discussions prior to the GS, as well as the Secretariat with the report writing. It also provided a transparent mechanism that enabled all Members to participate and to see each other's positions. This initiative should be kept.
- **Virtual Plenary Sessions (reports of the Presidents)** – the virtual discussions of texts proposed for adoption worked well, mostly because of the aforementioned pre-GS initiatives. Time restraints and the virtual format may have limited the number of interventions and discussions.
- **Report writing** – the short timeframe to finalise texts usually results in working late into the night together to draft and finalise the report, and such was the case again this year.
- **Resolutions** – the process of uploading Resolutions on the GS website worked well, but we are not sure if all Delegates were aware of this. The vote on the laying hens chapter meant that Members only had a very short time to review the Resolution before adoption, which may be of concern.

Gregorio Torres, Head of the Science Department, having consulted with colleagues in the Science Department noted that the Department shared Gillian's views as they had similar experiences related to the Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases and the Biological Standards Commission.

Montserrat Arroyo, Head of the Regional Activities Department (RAD), and Nathaly Monsalve, Regional Activities Coordination Manager (RAD) on the Regional Commission meetings

OIE Regional Commission meetings during the GS are key for our Delegates as they provide a 'special dedicated place' for each region to discuss internal institutional issues to better prepare and ensure a smooth running GS. This year in particular, those meetings were very sensitive due to the elections that were taking place and the fact that this was our first virtual GS. Additionally, the Regional Commission meetings were held as Zoom meetings, which is more convivial than a webinar format and allowed interaction and visibility among participants. The Monday Commission meetings gave Delegates the opportunity not only to have more direct interaction, but also to finetune their last discussions on the decisions needed as a region before going into the GS plenary sessions.

Organising the five Regional Commissions meetings in virtual format was a challenging but, at the same time, very enriching task for RAD and the Regional and Sub-regional Representations. We can happily and proudly say that the meetings were successful, and that we met our expectations regardless of their demanding nature in view of the elections of the OIE governance bodies, which required preparation, information and excellent communication within the Regional Commissions. Additionally, Delegates' expectations were also met as they were able to ensure discussions took place and key positions were finetuned before the start of the main GS activities.

What worked?

Key objectives were accomplished: (a) maintaining the institutional side of the meeting through an interactive and complete agenda within this new virtual format (which decreased the time for discussion); (b) providing the environment in which these conversations could take place leading as a result to clear outcomes (i.e. final decisions on institutional regional topics); (c) following a well-timed agenda; (d) ensuring good coordination and teamwork between RAD and the regional offices; and (e) developing the final reports on time.

- The institutional aspect of these meetings was preserved in the new virtual format thanks to a well-planned agenda covering institutional topics of relevance for each Regional Commission that had been agreed previously by each region, clear guidance provided to Delegates to facilitate the discussions regarding the elections as well

as, an environment that facilitated discussions among Delegates (in a closed session) about important topics for the regions, such as the proposals of candidates to be presented for the elections on Friday.

- Discussions were fruitful and with clear outcomes as had been planned, all of which were well reflected in the final meeting reports.
- Timekeeping went perfectly well; almost all meetings ended before expected.
- The coordination of RAD and the regional offices was very successful, there was a lot of groundwork which brought a fruitful result in the end.
- Final reports developed in collaboration with the regions were very well done - short, simple and with essential information.

What could be improved?

It was very challenging to simultaneously organise all five virtual meetings in the same day, with different time zones, and without having a specific previous procedure on how to provide a virtual setting for Delegates in which they would be at ease to discuss elections and express their opinions via specific tools in a secure environment. There were a lot of lessons and discoveries as things progressed during the whole process of GS preparation (together with ECU).

From RAD's side, we will improve the procedure for organising virtual discussions to take into consideration as many scenarios as possible, such as expressing opinions both anonymously and publicly (something we will need to work on in collaboration with ECU). A key lesson was that involving our colleagues from the regional offices by defining and sharing clear responsibilities between us, resulted in a smoother and more proactive process.

Mara Elma Gonzalez Ortiz, Head of the Events Coordination Unit (ECU), on the 100% virtual event

The main lesson we learnt (rather we confirmed) is that the complexity of the GS, enhanced by its virtual format, pre-GS events and special features or initiatives, requires more time for its overall organisation. On balance, the pluses outweigh the minuses and the event took place without any noticeable hitches, but the cost in terms of stress and workload over a very short period of time was consequential. Nonetheless, patience and flexibility were important to overcome challenges and to address unforeseen issues.

Everything needs to be very well planned and tasks need to be effectively distributed to ensure a smooth-running event. The distribution of roles using the event run sheet and the training provided to active staff (facilitators, panellists, backstage supporting staff and rapporteurs) before the event was fundamental to the success of the GS.

Good facilitation is crucial for a virtual event as this is what the audience sees and hears, at the same time, it allows the supporting staff to perform the transitions at the precise moment they are needed throughout the event.

It is also important to reduce the level of detail in the instructions, sometimes less is more.

The role of some the Regional and Sub-regional Representations was crucial in ensuring the participation of countries and for basic troubleshooting.

This is what we would do differently to improve the participant's experience:

Ensure that a pre-established timeline for all communications dealing with the logistic aspects of the GS be formally established and respected by all actors involved.

Any special feature or initiative (e.g. commenting and requests to take the floor) should be launched by giving participants more time to understand its purpose and how to use it properly.

Ensure that staff from all Regional and Sub-regional Representations have the appropriate level of knowledge of the processes associated with the GS to allow them to directly assist Delegates with their queries.

Regardless the format of the GS, either presential, hybrid or virtual, we should give participants from around the world the possibility and space to meet and exchange with their peers.

Emily Tagliaro, Head of the Engagement and Investment Department (EID), on the interaction with OIE partners

In the past, our department has taken advantage of the GS to set up meetings with partners to discuss projects and contributions to the OIE World Fund. This year, with the event happening virtually and in a condensed format, we did not have the opportunity to hold our usual bilateral meetings. However, thanks to the wide use of digital tools, communication with our resource partners was ensured. Given that many OIE projects were impacted by Covid-19, we have been in close contact with our partners over the last year to talk about timelines and re-programming of activities. Furthermore, given increased global interest in themes related to Covid-19 (preparedness, surveillance, wildlife, and others), we have also been coordinating with partners who are looking to make financial contributions to associated initiatives.

During the last World Fund Advisory Committee meeting held in December 2020, partners remarked that while virtual meetings cannot entirely replace face-to-face interaction, they are a practical option for those stationed far away and are more environmentally friendly – and often, more cost-efficient – than presential meetings. Going forward, our department is open to exploring the best ways to interact with our various partners, some of whom will likely have new organisational policies and practices in place post-Covid-19, while making sure that the OIE is present and available to meet with new resource partners as opportunities arise.

> ***Another novelty for our team during this year's General Session was the inclusion of a consolidated financial summary report, developed in collaboration with the Budget Unit.***

This was shared with the Delegates to facilitate their understanding of the OIE Financial Report (88 SG/4), the World Animal Health and Welfare Fund – 2021 Budget Estimates (88 SG/5), and the 2022 Budget Estimates (88SG/6B). The Budget Unit and EID also developed a summary report for the OIE Management Committee dedicated to the performance of the World Fund. We'd like to invite all colleagues to read these documents to get a better understanding of the OIE's budget and overall financial situation.

- OIE SG88 Financial Summary Report
- World Animal Health and Welfare Fund Financial Management Report

We wish to thank our colleagues for writing this collaborative article for the OIE In-house Times.