



AC/7/2014

Administrative Circular

2014-02-14

TO ALL NATIONAL COMMITTEES

TO ALL TC/SCs

Dear Sir/Madam,

Remote participation at TC/SC meetings

1 Background

IEC experts and National Committees have expressed a desire to be able to participate remotely in some meetings when economics or travel disruptions such as volcano eruptions make it challenging to participate in meetings in person.

Currently remote participation in meetings is sometimes used for Working Groups and Project teams, since that type of work can be broken into smaller tasks, the groups themselves are relatively small, and most of the participants are known to each other from previous face to face meetings.

Many National Bodies and regional groups use remote participation regularly through teleconferencing or web based meeting tools. When looking at applying this tool on a global basis, it becomes more challenging since the major groups of IEC experts in the regions are not spaced 8 hours apart, and windows of opportunity for a global meeting become shorter.

This AC addresses the question of remote participation in Plenary meetings of TCs and SCs. The SMB set up an Ad-Hoc Group with the task to propose guidelines on the subject of remote participation at TC/SC meetings. The AhG restricted its work to the combination of a physical meeting and a web meeting.

The nature of a physical meeting and a web meeting are different and require different arrangements. Large, in-person meetings that are of a longer duration cause problems for the online participant. These meetings normally do not have the optimal arrangements for teleconferencing. The acoustics of large rooms with many participants are often not optimal for online participants, which makes it difficult to follow the meetings and to contribute in an efficient way. Based on experiences cited, the quality and performance of the technical equipment has a significant impact on the experience of the local and remote participants. Hosts have facilities with varying degrees of technical capabilities, so this is a significant factor to be taken into consideration when deciding to have a meeting with remote participation.

A fundamental challenge to participating online from different time zones in long meetings is the fact that the online participants cannot easily participate in the whole meeting. Also, an important part of any meeting is the informal discussions over breaks and lunch where delegates can informally explain, understand, and forge the compromises needed for the consensus processes to work. The online participants do not have the same interaction with the other participants.

It was concluded that for this trial, given the restrictions of virtual/in-person meetings, efficient participation and contribution of the remote participants can only be achieved by limiting the amount of remote participation in a plenary meeting. The problem of time zones cannot be solved without changes in the arrangements of the physical meetings.

2 Principles of remote participation at TC/SC meetings

The SMB agreed to the following recommendations:

- A one year pilot with online participation to physical plenary TC meetings will be started following the publication of this Administrative Circular by using the attached guidelines, to gain experience.

After the trial period the results must be evaluated and the final guidelines for online participation adjusted, if the trial justifies the continuation of remote participation.

- The decision to allow remote participation at a TC or SC plenary meeting rests solely with the TC or SC officers, in consultation with the Technical Officer and the meeting hosts.
- If remote participation is to be allowed at a TC / SC meeting, the meeting agenda must indicate that fact. All participants (physical or remote) must be registered and properly credentialed for the meeting through the IEC Meeting Registration System.
- Online participation to a physical plenary meeting is limited to no more than 1/3 of the total number of participants.
- Online participants, who have taken part in the discussions, will have the right to comment and to cast a vote on issues discussed whilst present.
- After the trial period, if remote participation is continued, the guidelines will be incorporated in the Directives and toolkit for experts and Officers. The guidelines should be added to training modules for experts organized by the IEC.

3 Guidelines for remote participation

3.1 Requirements for online meetings

The minimum requirement for a remote meeting is a web meeting system, which makes it possible for the participants to participate with audio communication and screen sharing via the Internet. The AhG does not recommend a specific web conferencing tool at this stage, as IEC is still studying which web meeting tool could be offered to the IEC community. All documents for the meeting, including any working documents, revised text drafts, etc. should be accessible to all participants through the Collaboration Tool site.

Requirements for the meeting host:

- A high speed internet connection is essential,
- An audio installation, with microphones for the meeting chair and accessible to meeting speakers.
- The use of a video system, individual microphones, is optional at this stage

Requirements for the remote participants:

- A high speed internet connection.
- The online participant must have a web conferencing program installed with good quality audio and microphone. It is advised that online participants make use of a headset to avoid disturbing noises.
- It is highly recommended that online participants use a room without environmental noises and mute their phone / audio when not speaking.
- As the quality of the audio is very important, guidelines should be added for the use of the equipment in the meeting room and by the online participants.

3.2 Teleconference Etiquette

Experience shows that in teleconferences people often do not behave in the best way to make efficient participation possible. This could be improved by taking into account the specific restrictions of web meetings. Web meetings are more difficult to follow than normal plenary meetings. When participants do not behave as they should or do not use the equipment in the right way, it becomes even more difficult. There should be guidelines for participants with requirements for the use of equipment and professional behavior in meetings (no disturbing noises, micro on mute, disciplines in discussions, etc.). Officers should use the meeting rules and make every effort for equal participation of in-person and online experts. The participants must be informed about the meeting rules before the meeting.

3.3 Registration and identification

Registration for meetings should be done by all participants, by means of the IEC meeting registration system. The meeting registration system must have an extra option to indicate online participation. This is sufficient for identification of all participants, also of remote participants. Only registered remote participants will receive the information with the access code for online participation. There is no need for secure identification if there is no formal voting in a meeting.

3.4 Voting rights

SMB decision 147/22 states that experts who have not taken part in the discussion are not permitted to vote. Remote participation makes it possible that experts take part in the discussions and cast votes in the meeting. However, allowing remote participants to vote could lead to less physical participants and less effective meetings. Remote participation will impact the plenary meetings. For this reason the number of remote participants should be limited. It is proposed to limit the number of remote participants to a maximum of 1/3 of the total number of delegates. P members should also attend meetings on a regular basis whenever possible for reasons previously cited. Due to the need to gain additional experience, and the difficulties of a longer global meeting that must occur during the normal sleeping hours of some participants, the SMB feels it is premature to allow fully online TC / SC meetings at this time.

3.5 Languages

The problem of different languages is solved by speaking only in one language, usually English. This is an advantage for native English speakers. For remote listeners it is even more difficult to understand what is said in the meeting, as there is no visible contact and the audio is not always of high quality. There should be some guidance for all speakers, to make them better understood by remote listeners. The additional use of the chat function of web meeting tools may be useful.

3.6 Consequences for plenary meetings

In order to make an effective contribution to physical meetings by remote participants, plenary meetings should be organized in a different way. The remote participants must communicate in advance with the organizers of the meeting about the specific topics to be discussed. The organizers of the meeting should take into account remote participation with the planning of the agenda. This is not a requirement but left to the responsibility of the Officers of the committee. Guidelines could be added in the toolkit for Officers.

3.7 Training for online meetings

There is a need for practical guidance for participants in web meetings. There are good tutorials available on the internet for the technical use of specific software tools. The guidance should include the use of the system, use of the microphone, speaking discipline, avoiding noises, etc. While many participants may be familiar with these practices from national or regional meetings, the training should also address the unique challenges of a global meeting. It is recommended that IEC includes the use of online meetings in the existing training courses. There is no need for new specific training for online meetings.

Yours faithfully,

F.W.P. Vreeswijk
General Secretary & CEO