

16th MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE
4-6 May 2021, Virtual Meeting Format

**NOTE OF THE SECRETARIAT REGARDING THE DATE AND FORMAT OF MOP8
IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

The various effects of the COVID-19 have resulted in a number of restrictions impacting, among others, travel and the organisation of in-person meetings worldwide. As a result, in the period between May 2020 and March 2021, meetings of the intergovernmental bodies of UNEP and its associated Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), have been conducted virtually. Some meetings were shortened and took place with a more limited agenda, while others took place at a later date than originally scheduled. The UNEA5 meeting, for example, was split into two parts: the first one took place in a virtual format in February 2021, and the second one is scheduled for 2022 and will hopefully be held in-person. All in all, the majority of meetings that had been scheduled for 2020 and early 2021 took place and only a limited number of meetings were postponed.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is still spreading worldwide, despite some positive news from vaccination campaigns, there is currently still uncertainty on the format of the 8th session of the AEW A Meeting of the Parties (MOP8), which is planned to take place in Budapest, Hungary on 5 - 9 October 2021, in the framework of the international hunting and nature exhibition “One with Nature” (<https://onewithnature2021.org/en>), currently scheduled for the period from 25 September to 14 October 2021.

It is proposed to the StC to review and deliberate on the four below scenarios and to present one or two preferred options to the Secretariat to enable it to proceed with for planning of the up-coming MOP. The StC could make a final conclusion on the format and timing of the AEW A MOP by latest mid-July 2021, once Hungary has decided if the exhibition will take place (tbc by end of June).

1 – Situation in Hungary

The Government of Hungary has planned a vaccination campaign to cover all citizens who registered for immunisation by the end of June. As at 25 April, a total of 37 % of the entire population of Hungary has already received at least the first dose of vaccination and, as a response to that, the daily number of new cases of infected persons has been declining. At the moment epidemiological data do not warrant considerations of postponing or cancelling the exhibition starting on 25 September. Decisions on the nature of international conferences and congresses in the frame of the ‘One with Nature’ exhibition are not made by Hungary alone (and even more factors may need to be considered for sound decisions with respect to those), but decisions whether they will be held physically (“offline”), online or in a hybrid setup need to be made soon but not later than mid-July, so that the technical preparations and travel arrangements (bookings of flight, accommodation, etc.) can be adjusted accordingly.

2 – Four options for the 8th Meeting of the Parties to AEWA

The treaty provisions and AEWA Rules of Procedures do not expressly prohibit or authorise virtual meetings. The UNEP/AEWA Secretariat has therefore assessed several options, benefitting from the experiences of inter-governmental bodies of UNEP and other MEAs. The different options are:

1. organising MOP8 in-person as scheduled;
2. postponing MOP8 beyond October 2021 for the purpose of holding an in-person meeting;
3. organising MOP8 in a hybrid format (partially in-person and partially virtual);
4. conducting MOP8 fully virtually.

Each of the options has its advantages and disadvantages, some of them raising specific issues.

Whatever option is chosen for the meeting, attention should be given to ensuring transparency, inclusivity and offering equal opportunity to all Contracting Parties. The option should also comply with the Agreement text and the applicable Rules of Procedures. It should also provide interpretation in both official languages of the Agreement (English and French).

It is worth noting that the choice of the format will make no difference with respect to the production and publication of the meeting documents, given that online platforms for inter-governmental meetings already exist.

Option 1 – Organising MOP8 as scheduled as in-person meeting on 5 - 9 October in Budapest, Hungary

This option will only be possible if the ‘One with Nature’ exhibition is maintained and travel regulations during the given period allow for all representatives of all Parties to attend.

After having organised and conducted seven MOPs the Secretariat is well trained in this regard and Parties are familiar with the format. This scenario offers the possibility to build working groups during the meeting, in particular during lunch breaks and in the evenings, and allows discussions during coffee breaks in order to find consensus on sensitive matters. It also offers good networking opportunities, enough time to go through the meeting agenda and it offers the opportunity and space to organise numerous side-events in the margins of the meeting.

The costs of travel and DSA have to be covered for at least one participant from each eligible Party (see Resolution 7.12 para 13 for the conditions of eligibility <https://www.unep-aewa.org/en/document/financial-and-administrative-matters-11>), and despite being planned as a paperless meeting, the CO2 footprint needs to be taken into consideration.

Depending on the COVID19 situation, some special sanitary and security measures may need to be taken, but this should not affect the organisation of the meeting too much.

Option 2 – Postponing the MOP8 beyond October 2021

The AEWA core budget is adopted at each MOP on a triennial basis. The current core budget covers the period 2019 - 2021. If the next triennial core budget is not adopted by 31 December 2021, the Secretariat will not have any approved budget beyond this period and will not be able to function. The AEWA MOP8 therefore, in principle, needs to be convened by latest December 2021.

Should MOP8 have to be postponed until 2022, then consideration would need to be given to the negotiation and adoption of an AEWA core budget beyond 31 December 2021. In response to such a scenario, a MOP organised in two separate parts, such as UNEA5 has done, could address the issue of the budget. The first part could be held as online meeting by December 2021 with a reduced agenda, dealing only with administrative/financial matters and the programme of work of the Secretariat. Meanwhile, the second part of the MOP on technical matters could be organised as an in-person meeting in 2022 once the travel restrictions are lifted. This option would have the disadvantage to delay the work of the Technical Committee for several months.

As the AEWA core budget is closely linked to the technical activities approved by the MOP, this could result in a disconnection between the budget decisions and some mandates which would only be reviewed and adopted in the suggested second part of the MOP to be held in-person in 2022.

Postponing the meeting could also mean losing the current host country if the meeting was no longer planned to take place in the margins of the ‘One with Nature’ exhibition which celebrates the 50th anniversary of the 1971 exhibition.

Last but not least, the closure of the MOP on 9 October, as currently scheduled, coincides with the second peak day of the World Migratory Bird Day, which is planned to be celebrated in collaboration with the host country and in the frame of MOP8.

Option 3 – Organising MOP8 in a hybrid format (partially in-person and partially virtual) on 5 - 9 October

Under this option MOP8 would take place on 5 – 9 October 2021 as in-person and as online meeting in a combined format: part of the participants would attend MOP8 in person, while others would follow MOP8 discussions online.

This option of a hybrid format takes into account the fact that the entry into Hungary in October will probably depend on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic in the countries of departure, as well as in Hungary itself. This could imply limitations on travel and the issuance of visa for delegates from certain countries and prevent these delegates from attending the physical meeting.

Thus, this option could lead to a different treatment of Parties. Depending, to a large extent, on the progress of national vaccination campaigns over the coming months, this option might, in particular, put Parties from the African region at a disadvantage, potentially preventing them from attending MOP8 in person.

Finally, having to organise both, a virtual and in-person meeting, will stretch on the limited human resources of the Secretariat to run a meeting of such scope and size.

Option 4 – Organising MOP8 in a full virtual format on 5 - 9 October 2021

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat has successfully conducted a number of meetings virtually, including the 16th meeting of the AEWA Technical Committee in January 2021, with the aim to take decisions on a number of issues of procedural or substantive nature. Many other MEAs have also already used such virtual meeting formats. The Rules of Procedure (RoP) of the AEWA MOP adopted by MOP7 indicate that the meeting rules shall apply *mutatis mutandis* to any other meeting held in the framework of the Agreement. These RoP should, therefore, apply to a virtual meeting of the AEWA MOP, unless otherwise decided by the MOP. For in-person meetings, “present” means physically

present, with the exception of the EU members states as the European Commission represents the states which are also Parties to AEWA. For the purpose of virtual meetings, “present” could be defined by the MOP e.g. to cover participation through videoconference or other electronic means.

In most cases, virtual meetings allow for better participation of representatives, because the countries can register more delegates, thereby boosting their full and effective participation at different thematic sessions of the MOP (e.g. budget and technical thematic sessions). That could also be the case for partners from NGOs and the civil society. Under this scenario, all participants will be treated equally, compared to option 3 (the hybrid option).

For such a virtual meeting format, the RoP would be complemented by operational guidelines for the effective participation at the virtual meeting, with the aim to ensure effective participation and facilitate the running of the virtual meeting. This would include among others:

- Managing any impacts from significantly increased sizes of meeting delegations by ensuring that the heads of delegations identify speakers on behalf of their delegation;
- Establish procedures for taking the floor or providing comments during the virtual meeting;
- Ensuring registration of all participants upon entry in the virtual meeting portal using a specified format to ensure ease of identification of all participants, especially for the purpose of identifying delegations with credentials;
- Providing support to eligible delegations to facilitate their participation by breaching the digital divide and enhancing their access to suitable technology required to participate at such virtual meetings, as applicable and following the rules established by UNEP;
- Providing training to facilitate effective participation of delegates, through pre-test sessions prior to the MOP. The AEWA African Pre-MOP8 meeting planned virtually for July 2021 offers such a training opportunity for the African Parties.

Regarding interpretation, the UN has established Interprefy and Kudoway as the standard software to be used for large meetings that require remote simultaneous interpretation. However, these platforms are technically complex and not compatible with the needs of AEWA meetings. A derogation has therefore been granted from UN New York for using Zoom, as this software is efficient for interpretation and the bandwidth requirements are much lower than in case of other platforms. Most softwares, including Zoom, offer the possibility to have parallel working groups. The UNEP/AEWA Secretariat with the support of the IT team at UNV (as the Secretariat IT service provider) would provide technical support during the meeting to ensure smooth operation and ease of platform use.

Among the challenges, it should be noted that virtual meetings offer limited options for direct negotiations between delegations, compared to in-person meetings. There would also be no in-person networking opportunities.

Due consideration should also be given to time zone differences to ensure equal participation and inclusiveness among Parties. Fortunately, the AEWA Range States encompass only few different time-zones. However, meeting days would still need to be shorter than for in-person meetings, e.g. from 10 am to 5 pm. One option could be to use the ‘field trip day’ as an additional meeting day. However, this would likely lead to difficulties for the Secretariat to edit, translate and finalise all documents in time for adoption on the last day of the MOP.

It also may be difficult to set up side-events and any other events such as the Champions night and the AEW Awards session in a virtual format. These events could potentially be replaced by webinars or videos presented during the week before the MOP.