Security Council Open Debate on Working Methods

“Agility and innovation: lessons for the future from the COVID-19 pandemic”

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Mr President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen--

It is a privilege for Security Council Report to be invited to brief the Security Council. SCR’s aim is to contribute, in an informed and impartial manner, to the Council’s effectiveness, transparency and accountability.

Let me acknowledge the work of Ambassador Rhonda King, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, in chairing the Informal Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Questions, and the role of Estonia as Vice-Chair. I also want to pay tribute to Loraine Sievers, co-author of “The Procedure of the UN Security Council”.

It is a particular pleasure to be with you in the Council chamber, and in a week when all but one of its meetings and those of its subsidiary bodies will take place in person for the first time since mid-March 2020. That month, faced with a mounting pandemic, and its brutal impact on New York City, the Security Council acted decisively in agreeing on interim working methods. By so doing, members were true to Article 28 of the Charter, and quickly resumed meeting continuously—the first of the principal organs, aside from the Secretary-General, to get back to business.

The Security Council’s rapid agreement on new ways to work was historic. These ground-breaking arrangements have now been tested for fifteen months. Members have found that VTC meetings can save considerable time. More ministers and heads of government join, and chair, Council open debates. Subsidiary body meetings are never constrained by a lack of meeting rooms. Daily agendas and draft resolutions are now circulated electronically, in a fine example of environmental awareness. Digital platforms have truly shown their value to the Council.

At the same time, COVID-19 restrictions struck at the heart of international diplomacy, leaving Council members without face-to-face negotiations, and the myriad informal opportunities to explore possible ways forward, where personal relationships deepen and trust can develop. The new Council best practice may be found in hybrid working methods that balance the remote with the proximate.

Mr President,

At the end of March 2020, SCR observed that while numerous technical difficulties had gradually been resolved, some fundamental procedural challenges had arisen: “key among them was whether VTC meetings would be considered official meetings of the Council”. If they would not be official, SCR asked, “how would the Council perform certain essential tasks, such as adopting resolutions to renew mandates that would otherwise expire?”

The Council quickly found ways to perform its most essential tasks. It renewed mission and sanctions mandates, even establishing a new peace operation, while holding briefings and debates on its agenda items. VTCs made all of this
possible and, at times, made it easier. Over the past year of Council VTCs, technical malfunctions have become fewer, and the users, more proficient. The level of security risk perceived as present in the Council’s digital platforms may be ripe for re-assessment.

Did the Council’s innovations in any way limit its ability to deliver on its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security? During these fifteen months, the Council did not add any new agenda items. The decision to designate VTC meetings as “informal” meetings may have brought some unintended constraints to Council processes. Voting on resolutions, a feature of formal meetings, has been encumbered with a written procedure. The accompanying oral explanations of vote, a boon to the Council’s transparency, have been eliminated. Closed consultations, intended to permit frank discussion and to avoid prepared statements, appear in general to have taken on heightened formality, and the use of press elements to keep the public informed—which had a strong start in March 2020—appears to have dwindled. Procedural votes, which require a formal meeting, have not been held during VTCs. Council members may wish to give serious consideration to ways of enabling procedural votes, and also to treating VTC meetings as official.

In March 2020, monthly Letters from the President became the vehicle for communicating the Council’s agreed interim working methods. These Letters, in themselves a new tool, reflect the critical role the Council president can play in shaping better ways of working.

Mr President,

As in-person meetings, and travel, resume, perhaps nothing will be more pressing than live engagement with peace operations and other situations of concern. It is 20 months since the last Council visiting mission. Some elected members are about to begin the final quarter of their Council tenures without ever having benefited from a Council field trip.

Well-designed field visits can strengthen Council members’ sense of ground realities, the effect of their decisions, and the challenges to mandate implementation—especially important now as the UN seeks to strengthen the impact of Action for Peacekeeping.

Still, there is scope for the Council to derive more value from its field visits.

The Council might consider, where possible, consolidating its own travel schedule and those of the heads of sanctions committees, other subsidiary bodies, and the Peacebuilding Commission, for greater coherence and effectiveness. As well, there could be a fresh look at the need for full-scale Council visiting missions. These tend to be extremely costly, but also brief, with packed programmes. Late last year, one speaker at the Hitting the Ground Running workshop said that the visiting Council members “tended to be moved from the airport to conference rooms and back to the airport without adequately seeing the situation on the ground”.

In past years, the Security Council has successfully deployed mini-missions of a subset of Council members. The most recent was in November 2012, when six elected Council members went to Timor-Leste just before that UN operation closed, spending four days in-country. The added ground time can expand possibilities for effective diplomacy. Would this not be a useful option now, for instance with UNDISAMS, a new mission—and also, perhaps, for visits to a handful of situations not on the Council’s agenda. Council members who remain in New York could, at selected moments, join these missions virtually via VTC. The Council has also once asked a single member to travel on its behalf, when the late Ambassador Oshima Kenzo of Japan, as the chair of the working group on peacekeeping operations, visited Ethiopia and Eritrea in November 2005.

Mr President,

The Council has proved that it can use the provisional rules of procedure and the UN Charter to be innovative and effective. This active use of existing tools, and the ready development of new ones, need not end as COVID-19
recedes. As the Council comes back to in-person meetings, the flexibility that the institution and its members showed during the COVID period is important to retain. The Council can keep existing good practices, resurrect worthwhile older initiatives, and continue to break new ground.

Thank you.