



Security Council

Open debate (VTC)

Agility and Innovation: Lessons for the future from COVID-19 Pandemic

New York, 16 June 2021

Statement by Switzerland on behalf of
the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group

Mr. President,

I am pleased to submit this statement on behalf of the 27 members of the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency group (ACT): Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Gabon, Ghana, Hungary, Ireland, Jordan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Maldives, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Portugal, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Sweden, Uruguay, and Switzerland. One of the core objectives of the ACT Group is to encourage better working methods in United Nations organs, in particular the Security Council. We thank today's briefers for their statements and commend the efforts deployed by Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in its capacity as Chair of the Informal Working Group on Documentation and other Procedural Questions (IWG).

The focus of today's open debate could hardly be more timely, as the UN Headquarters in New York is progressively moving back to in-person meetings following the unprecedented operating challenges caused by COVID-19. Like in so many other fields, COVID-19 put to the test and laid bare the strengths and weaknesses of the Security Council's working methods. The ACT Group is convinced that we cannot go back to a *status quo ante* - we must not miss the opportunity that this crisis has generated to consolidate the strengths of the Security Council working methods, address its fundamental flaws, and build on the innovations made.

We are grateful for the opportunity given by this open debate for our Group to make several proposals towards these objectives, while at the same time working towards enhancing transparency, efficiency and effectiveness in the work of the Security Council.

Mr. President,

If there is **one main lesson to be drawn** from the crisis, it is that working methods are of existential importance for a functioning multilateral system. After the COVID-19 pandemic rendered physical meetings impossible, adapting the working methods to the new situation has been essential for the Security Council in order to ensure business continuity and discharge of its mandate. Doing so as quickly as possible is also a key responsibility of the Council towards the wider UN membership, on whose behalf it acts.

The ACT Group thus welcomes the leadership by successive presidencies to adapt the working methods to constantly evolving circumstances during the crisis. We equally welcome the constant engagement on working methods, either in the framework of the IWG or with regular discussions under “AoB”. We also look favorably at the trend of addressing issues related to working methods during opening and wrap-up sessions, including with the direct participation of the IWG Chair. The ACT Group calls on the Council to keep this positive momentum and focus on constant improvement of working methods as we move back to the Council Chamber. Expediting the adoption of the eight draft notes of the president currently being discussed in the IWG would be an important contribution towards these goals.

A **second lesson to be drawn** from the last fifteen months is that this crisis has forced people and institutions to adapt and innovate. The ACT Group would like to commend Security Council members that have taken innovative initiatives in the field of working methods. We see great merit in considering the present crisis as a positive opportunity to make permanent some recent adaptations, provided that they reinforce the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of the Security Council also under normal circumstances.

Among these, there is no doubt that the virtual meetings allowed for greater high-level participation from capital in Council meetings. The ACT Group sees merit in considering maintaining whenever appropriate the possibility of virtual high-level participation of all UN members and to combine it with in-person meetings of the Council. Such hybrid formats would not only enhance the inclusion of the Council’s work but also provide more equal access at high-level by member States from around the world. The holding of virtual meetings has also enabled the participation of some civil society briefers who may have been otherwise unable to visit New York in person, a practice that the ACT Group encourages. We also invite the Security Council to continue the practice of the written circulation to all permanent missions of all statements made by briefers and Council members during open meetings, including EoVs during adoptions of resolutions. Furthermore, the ACT Group calls on the Council to continue the positive momentum towards the continued institutionalization of wrap-up sessions, a clearly noticeable trend in the last two years. We call on Council members to continue to work towards the improvement of this well-established format, in particular with regard to interactivity and substance of discussions and to draw from the proposals contained in the *ACT Non-paper on wrap-up session* of 14 June 2021.

A **third lesson to be drawn** from the COVID-19 pandemic is that there is still room for improvements if/when the Council is faced with another situation requiring extraordinary adaptations to the functioning of the Council. The ACT Group calls on the Council to actively engage in contingency planning, including on the basis of – but not limited to –the proposals made by the IWG Chair. In doing so, the Council’s primary objective should be ensuring that such contingency plans allow the Council and its subsidiary organs to carry out all aspects of its work, in particular enabling the Council to vote virtually and in real time on both substantive and procedural matters, in line with Article 27 of the UN Charter and the Provisional Rules of Procedure, and to ensure official meeting records for Council public meetings that would reflect the meetings verbatim. We regret that, during the current pandemic, health restrictions impacted the inclusivity of the Council both for non-Council Members and for other stakeholders. It is crucial that the participation of civil society representatives, in particular women and youth, be strengthened under any circumstances.

Furthermore, as the digitalization of our societies is accelerating, the Council would be remiss not to harness the potential provided by technology in order to better function under any circumstances. While we reiterate our strong preference for participation by non-Council members through physical presence at the UNHQ, it cannot be excluded that situations necessitating the use of virtual participation at meetings emerge in the future. For those circumstances (and indeed while open debates continue to be conducted virtually), we urgently need to find a solution to enable non-Council members to participate fully and directly in virtual open debates. For both normal and extraordinary circumstances, the ACT Group also reiterates its invitation for the Council to explore the possibility of receiving more dynamic virtual briefings (including data-based presentations, visualization and/or augmented reality) and of conducting

virtual Security Council visits to the field as a complementary instrument to existing and established physical visits.

The ACT Group would also like to reiterate its call on the Security Council to give due consideration, in its Annual Report, to the impact of the pandemic on international peace and security and the Council's work and tools, possibly through a dedicated section with an overall and cross-cutting analysis of the matter.

Mr. President,

As the pandemic acutely demonstrates, the working methods of the Security Council are of interest to the whole UN membership and the way to guarantee its readiness, agility and inclusivity in the face of any crisis. Improving them is our collective responsibility, especially as the Security Council – just like all of us – will not have the excuse of “not seeing it coming” when extraordinary circumstances of a similar magnitude like COVID-19 are on our doorstep. Drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing improvements is thus a matter of urgency.

As recent progress as well as shortcomings in responding to the COVID-19 crisis show, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness are mutually reinforcing principles that must continue to guide improvements in the working methods of the Security Council. The ACT group is committed to do its part and to actively contribute and support any initiative towards this end.

Thank you, Mr. President.