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Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to resolution [75/244](#) and previous resolutions on the subject and responds to the mandates addressed to the Secretary-General contained therein. It also provides information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2020.

* [A/76/50](#).



I. Introduction

1. Never has the pattern of conferences at the United Nations been disrupted to the extent it was in 2020. The onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in March changed the way conferences had previously been serviced almost overnight. The response of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, in coordination with other service entities at the Secretariat's four main conference-servicing duty stations (New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi), was almost immediate. In record time, remote simultaneous interpretation platforms were identified, tested and procured, enabling meetings management teams to start programming and planning virtual and hybrid (part virtual, part in-person) meetings in a matter of months. The translation services transitioned almost immediately and seamlessly to fully remote operations thanks to the Department's long-standing policy of investing in and developing state-of-the-art, web-based tools to support the large-scale production of high-quality, multilingual documentation. The Protocol and Liaison Service similarly transitioned to virtual business processes immediately, which enabled it to continue registering newly arrived mission staff and recording other changes in the composition of missions and observer offices throughout 2020.

2. The impact and additional burden on staff were unprecedented. Although the number of meetings serviced was smaller than in previous years, the complexity of those that were held was considerably greater, requiring far more effort from the Secretariat's meetings management and interpretation teams. The translation services were additionally affected by the continued austerity measures associated with the liquidity limitations, which prevented them from employing the usual external support to complement internal capacity. This created higher-than-usual per capita workloads for some documentation processing teams during a period of considerable stress and anxiety.

3. The fact that all calendar bodies were able to continue their work and that the Secretariat's key performance indicators for conference management declined only slightly in 2020 is testimony to the dedication, flexibility and sense of service of United Nations staff, who responded to the crisis by going above and beyond expectations to ensure the delivery of high-quality multilingual conference services and hence the continuation of the essential work of the United Nations during this exceptional year. The challenges they faced, the actions they took and the results they achieved during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic are described below.

II. Meetings management

Impact of COVID-19 on meetings management

4. The COVID-19 pandemic had a transformative impact on meetings at all four duty stations from March to the end of 2020. Stay-at-home instructions, restrictions on gatherings and physical distancing rules limited access to premises, room capacity and the provision of interpretation and other meeting services, posing an unanticipated challenge of extraordinary proportions. The magnitude of the upheaval and the effectiveness of the Secretariat's response are only partially reflected in the key performance indicators for meetings management reported in the present section.

5. Access to United Nations Headquarters in New York was immediately restricted at the outset of the pandemic, limiting in-person meetings on the premises to a very small number of essential meetings. During the main part of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly, only meetings of the Assembly, its Main Committees and

the Security Council, as well as a limited number of other calendar meetings, were held in person. Meetings at the Palais des Nations in Geneva and the Vienna International Centre were suspended from mid-March 2020 to June and mid-May 2020, respectively. When in-person meetings could resume, it was under physical distancing rules. The conference facility in Nairobi had to remain closed to all but essential staff from mid-March to the end of the year.

6. The pandemic-related restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings caused a huge proportion of meetings to be cancelled or postponed, which resulted in a 67 per cent year-on-year reduction in the number of meetings held across the four duty stations, as shown in figure I. The global number of meetings held fell from 36,892 in 2019 to 12,266 in 2020, as shown in table 1.

Figure I

Meetings workload at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, 2015–2020

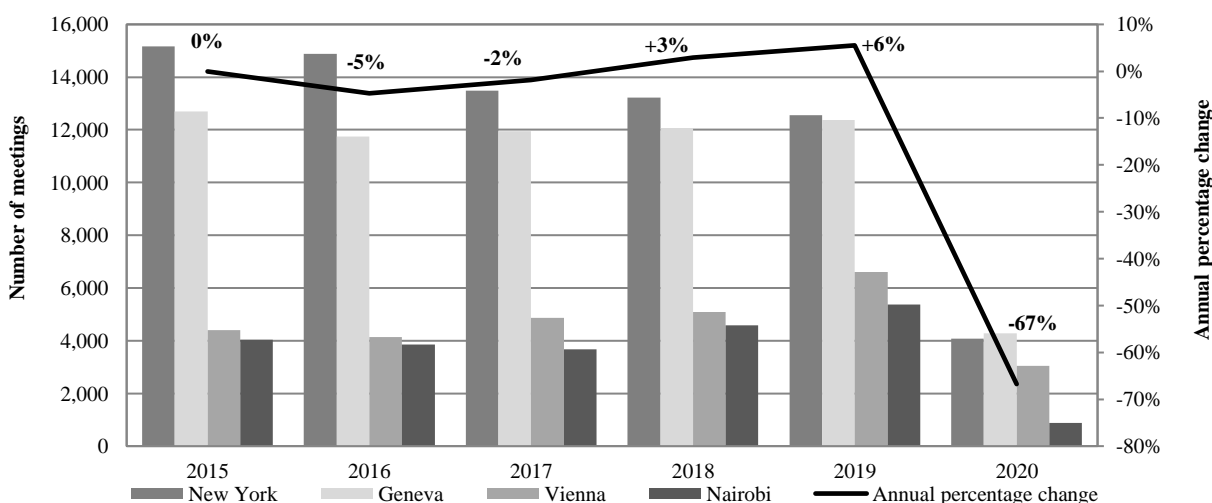


Table 1

Number of meetings held, global totals, 2015–2020

Number of meetings	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Global total	36 316	34 604	33 975	34 962	36 892	12 266

Response of the Secretariat

7. Arranging the 12,266 meetings that were held in 2020, often in new virtual or hybrid formats and after several postponements, in a constantly evolving situation, was an extremely complicated task. Calendar meetings approved by the General Assembly were given priority in the use of the conference facilities and services available, which reduced their availability for extrabudgetary and ad hoc events in New York, Geneva and Vienna. By the end of March 2020 in Nairobi, all in-person meetings planned to take place there had been cancelled. Planned calendar meetings of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme had to be held virtually without interpretation until remote simultaneous interpretation contracts had been signed. Despite the 67 per cent decrease in the overall number of meetings, the number of non-calendar meetings still accounted for 67 per cent of meetings in 2020. The drop in the number of non-calendar

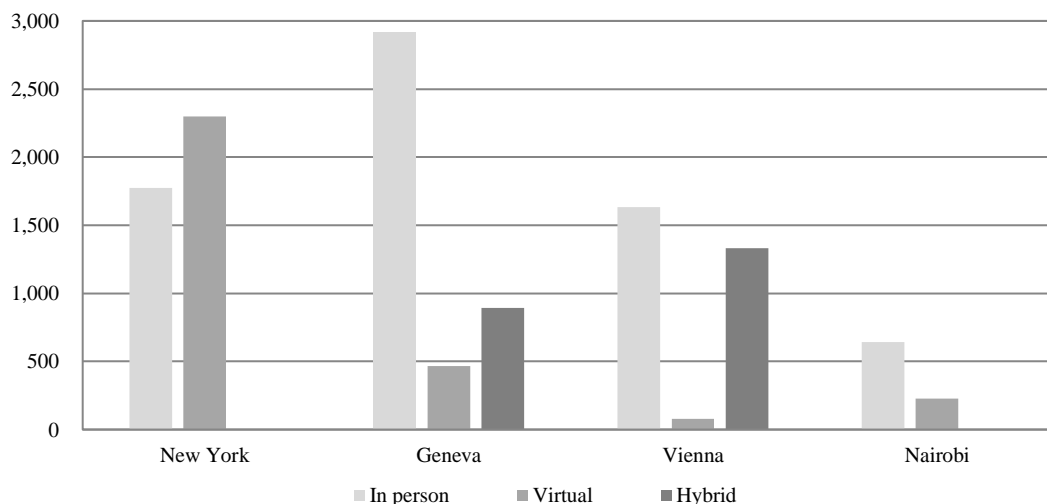
meetings was 71 per cent, as compared with 2015 levels, and 50 per cent for calendar meetings.

8. The sudden imposition of physical distancing measures accelerated plans to implement recommendation 6 of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU/REP/2018/6) that the executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by December 2021, provide the option for remote participation in all meetings and conferences. Intensive work got under way immediately to facilitate remote participation, including remote simultaneous interpretation. Commercially available platforms were tested across the Secretariat, resulting in the procurement of licences to provide interpretation through two modalities: one in which all participants and interpreters are remotely located; and the other in which interpreters and other support staff work from United Nations premises, with all or some participants attending remotely. Thanks to the concerted efforts of the interpretation services, the procurement offices and information and communications technology, audiovisual and webcast teams at all four duty stations, three platforms for remote simultaneous interpretation were set up quickly. From June onward, interpretation was being provided to on-site, virtual and hybrid meetings of Member States at all four duty stations.

9. In New York, 240 meetings were serviced using remote simultaneous interpretation, with interpreters working mostly in co-located mode, that is, with the interpreters located on United Nations premises. In Geneva and Vienna, 572 and 244 meetings were, respectively, serviced with remote simultaneous interpretation, also in co-located mode. With the closure of the compound of the United Nations Office at Nairobi from the end of March 2020, efforts focused on providing remote simultaneous interpretation in fully dispersed mode, with interpreters working from different locations and United Nations premises all over the world. A total of 157 planned meetings were serviced with interpretation provided in this way. Globally, 1,213 meetings were serviced with remote simultaneous interpretation during 2020.

10. In all locations, the number of in-person meetings was largely dictated by the extent and duration of local restrictions on gatherings. Where venues were allowed to open, meeting capacity was limited by physical distancing requirements, which drastically reduced the permitted occupancy of meeting rooms. Capacity to provide interpretation in six languages was likewise reduced owing to the physical distancing requirements in the booths and the number of rooms equipped with the hardware and software necessary for delivering remote simultaneous interpretation. The number of in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings held by each duty station is shown in figure II. The use of hybrid meetings was curbed by the limited availability of conference rooms and the technical complications of setting up such meetings. Virtual meetings were therefore the preferred option in New York because of the occupancy limit of 40 per cent. In Geneva, more hybrid meetings were held than virtual ones since the host country's public health measures allowed the use of interpretation booths and audiovisual systems in conference centres. Importantly, the Member States' representatives in Geneva expressed a preference for having as high an in-person participation at meetings as public health measures allowed. Once the lockdown restrictions were lifted in Vienna and access, subject to observance of anti-COVID measures, was once more allowed to the Vienna International Centre, the governing bodies there opted for hybrid meetings whereby the Chair and the Secretary, as well as a limited number of participants mostly from Vienna-based permanent missions, were present on site. Nairobi's continued lockdown permitted only virtual meetings from April onwards.

Figure II
Formats of meetings held at the four main conference-servicing duty stations



11. The overall drop in the proportion of meetings arranged with and without interpretation between 2015 and 2020 was very similar: 63 and 67 per cent, respectively. All high-level events and activities surrounding the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations were supported with interpretation despite a very limited ability to work on site. Similarly, meetings and conferences on the official calendar were supported partly or fully remotely, including the high-level political forum on sustainable development in July 2020. It is against this backdrop that the utilization of conference services by different groups of meeting bodies in 2020 reported in sections II.B to II.E below should be evaluated.

12. Another notable aspect of the Secretariat's response to the situation in 2020 was the innovative solutions found to ensure the functioning of the intergovernmental process. For instance, the general debate of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly had to be organized in a unique way as it coincided with a global pandemic that was recognized by world leaders as the defining crisis of our time. Throughout the week, Heads of State and Government and Ministers for Foreign Affairs reaffirmed the central position of the United Nations and underscored its indispensable role for a stable and more prosperous international community. The statements were pre-recorded and interpretation was provided during their delivery.

13. Overall, a shift from servicing only traditional on-site meetings to offering virtual, hybrid and physically distanced in-person meetings was achieved in a matter of months. This required creativity, effort and collaboration, considering not only the speed with which new platforms had to be tested, procured and installed and the new procedures had to be introduced, but also the added complexity of servicing meetings using different formats and under extraordinary circumstances and the new demands these placed on staff.

A. Adoption of the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2022, requests for exceptions and intersessional departures

14. The Committee on Conferences will review, at its substantive session in September 2021, a draft calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations

for 2022 as prepared by the Secretariat ([A/AC.172/2021/L.2](#)) and transmit its recommendations to the General Assembly in its report for 2021 ([A/76/32](#)). Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution [40/243](#) to meet during the main part of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly have been received from four bodies at the time of preparing the present report. In accordance with established practice, the requests will be reviewed by the Committee, which will make a recommendation to the Assembly. The Committee approved 11 requests for intersessional departures in 2020.

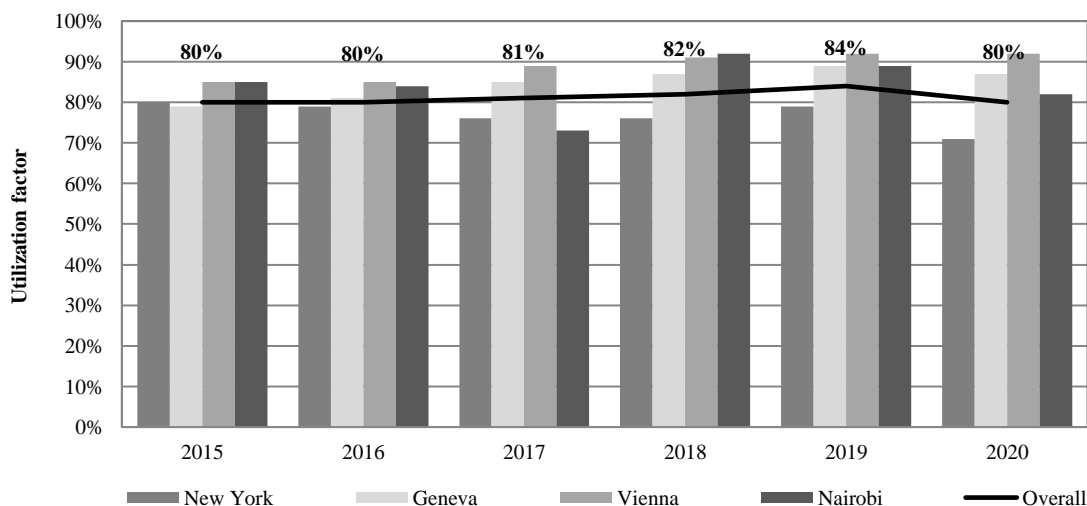
B. Utilization of conference-servicing resources by United Nations organs

15. All four duty stations continued efforts to optimize the interpretation utilization rate in accordance with the relevant provisions in resolutions of the General Assembly on the pattern of conferences, including by engaging with relevant intergovernmental and expert bodies. The overall utilization rate in 2020 was 80 per cent, 4 percentage points lower than in 2019, as shown in figure III.

Figure III

Interpretation utilization factor of all calendar bodies, 2015–2020

(Percentage)



C. Provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet “as required”

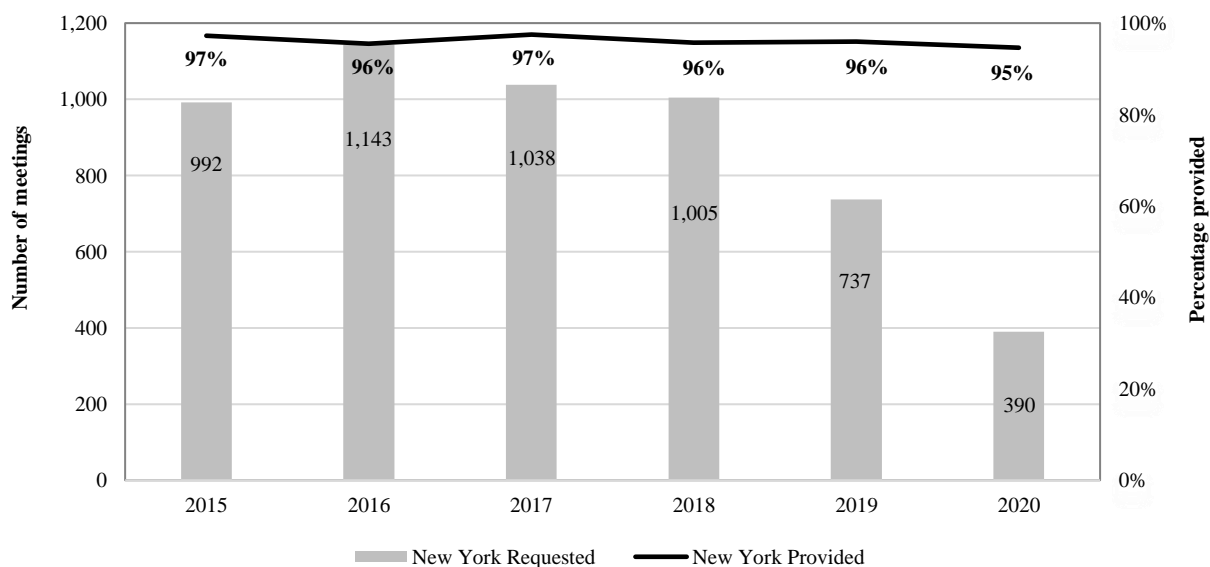
16. The provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet “as required” is shown in figure IV for New York and Geneva. Even though the meeting servicing dynamics during the pandemic were significantly different from those in previous years, in New York the percentage of such requests that were met in 2020 was 95 per cent, showing only a slight decrease from 96 per cent in 2019. In Geneva, the only body entitled to meet “as required” is the Human Rights Council, and all its requests for interpretation services and meeting rooms were met. In 2020, the human rights treaty bodies held 342 meetings with interpretation services. Of these, 313 (91.5 per cent) were held in three working languages, 24 (7.0 per cent) were held in four languages and 5 (1.5 per cent) were held in more than four languages. In accordance

with paragraph 58 of resolution [74/262](#), the decision on the number of working languages is the prerogative of each committee and is beyond the purview of the Secretariat. Owing to the COVID-19 situation and the limited availability of conferencing infrastructure for hybrid meetings, the number of human rights treaty body meetings was about a quarter of the usual volume. There are no bodies entitled to meet “as required” in Vienna or Nairobi.

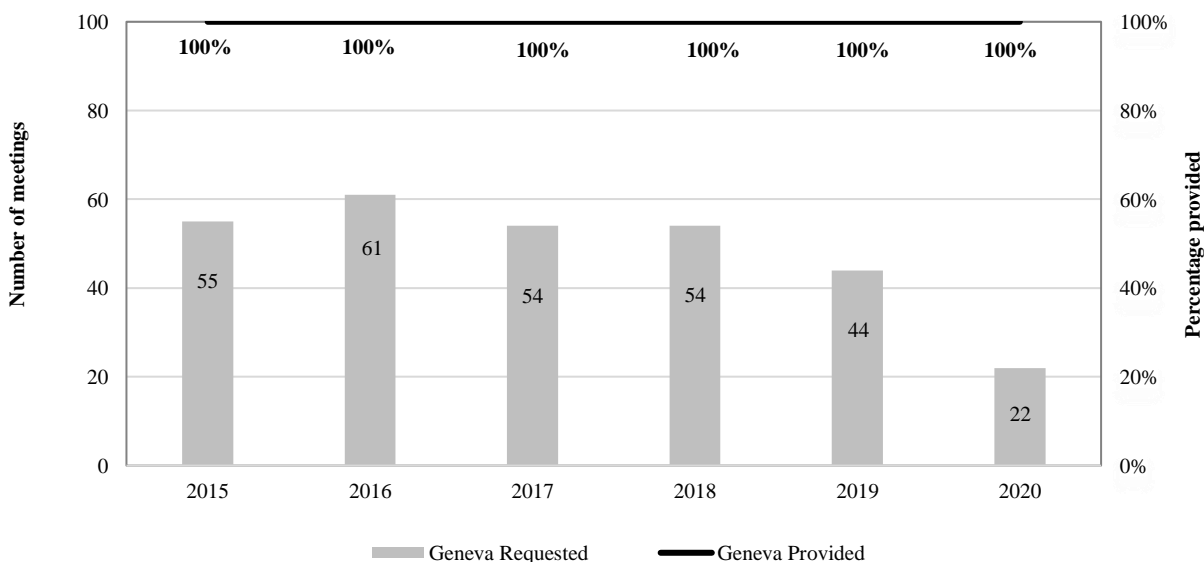
Figure IV

Provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet “as required”, 2015–2020

A. New York



B. Geneva

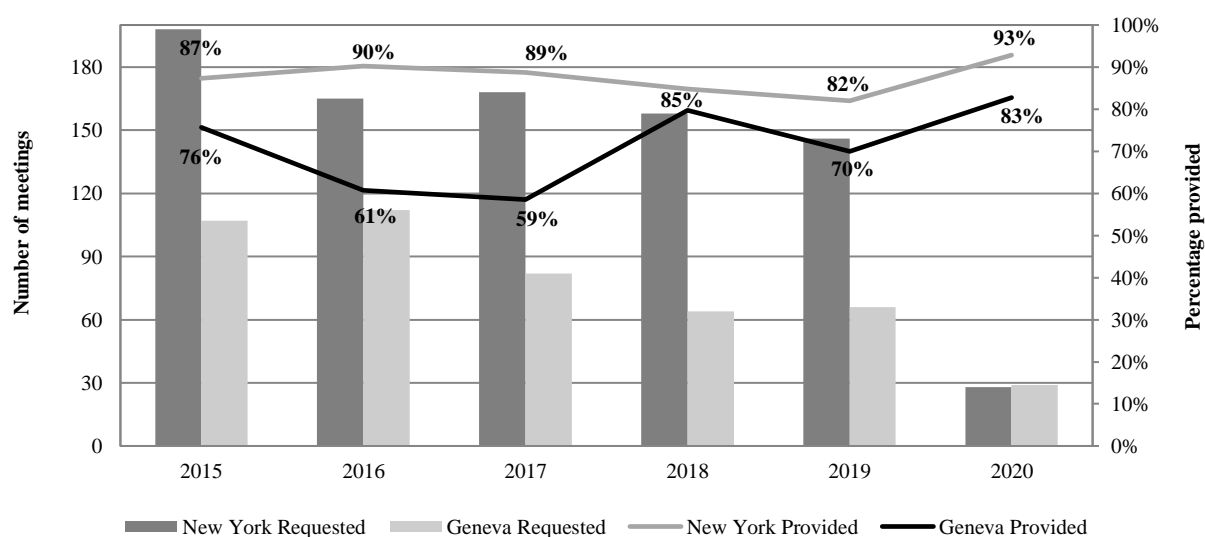


D. Provision of conference services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

17. All requests for meetings made by regional and other major groupings of Member States in 2020 were accommodated in the same year. Both New York and Geneva received far fewer requests for meetings with interpretation services in 2020 than in 2019. As a result, the proportion of such requests that were met rose to 93 per cent and 83 per cent in New York and Geneva, respectively, from 82 per cent and 70 per cent in 2019, as shown in figure V.

Figure V

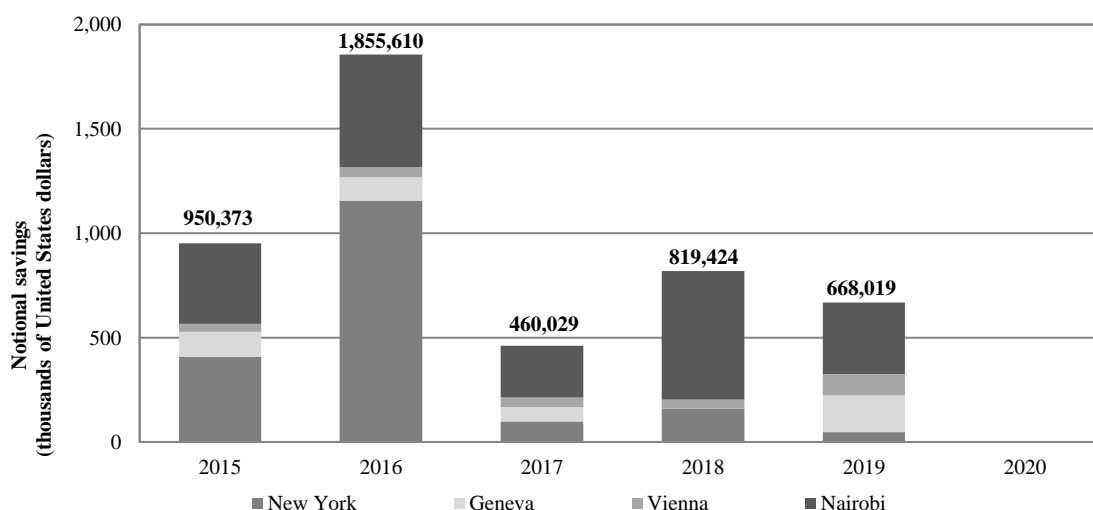
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva, 2015–2020



E. Meetings held away from established headquarters

18. No meetings were held away from established headquarters in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, no notional savings were achieved through the application of the integrated global management rule, as shown in figure VI. Geneva provided in-person interpretation support to 19 missions of special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council in various locations globally, significantly fewer than in previous years. These missions all took place before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Figure VI
Notional savings from shared services of meetings held away from headquarters, 2015–2020



F. Innovations in meetings services in 2020

19. In addition to managing an extraordinarily complex situation in terms of meetings planning and organization and rapidly introducing new meeting modalities and remote simultaneous interpretation and their associated procedures during exceptional circumstances, as described above, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management introduced several innovations in meetings services in 2020. A dedicated section entitled “eStatements” was created in the digital version of the *Journal of the United Nations* to facilitate access to statements delivered by delegations at the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly. The Secretariat’s meetings management system, gMeets, was adjusted to accommodate new virtual and hybrid formats.

20. In Geneva, new services included allowing for mandatory contact tracing through the Indico.UN registration tool. Sign language interpretation was provided for the first time in a fully remote manner and a new tool was installed to quickly generate room-specific seating charts and nameplates. In Nairobi, interpreters produced soundtracks in all languages for UNEP presentations, which proved crucial in the maintenance of an intergovernmental process on marine litter and microplastics pollution.

III. Documents management

Impact of COVID-19 on documents management

21. The long-standing policy of investing in and developing a suite of web-based tools for managing the workflow and supporting the large-scale processing of official multilingual documentation across the four duty stations proved its worth in 2020. Thanks to the preparedness of the documentation services, the transition to fully remote operations went smoothly and business continued uninterrupted. The main challenge was the continued hiring freeze that prevented the translation services from

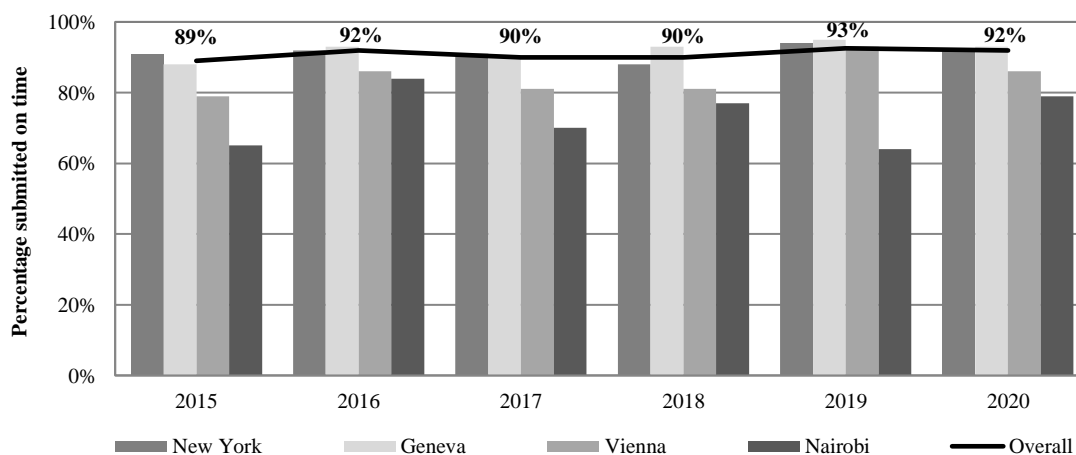
filling vacancies and using temporary or contractual support as they normally do. The 12 per cent reduction in the volume of words submitted for translation in 2020 compared with 2019 (see sect. III.B below) and the decline in the précis-writing workload did not offset the capacity shortfalls experienced by some services, especially in New York. The ability to achieve at least 90 per cent compliance with processing and issuance deadlines in a particularly trying year, as reported in section III.C below, is a direct reflection of the dedication and effort of the Secretariat's translation staff.

A. Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents

22. The disruption of the meetings calendar and other pandemic-related factors slightly affected compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing (editing, translation and formatting) at all duty stations. Overall compliance decreased from 93 per cent to 92 per cent (figure VII). High levels and even improvements in timely submission continued to be recorded in some instances.

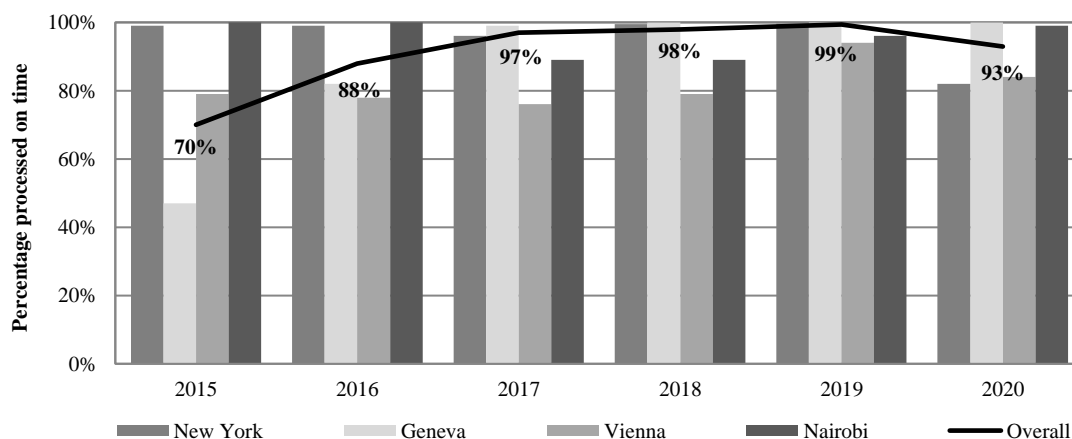
Figure VII

Timely submission of slotted documents, 2015–2020



23. During the year, 93 per cent (2,466 out of a total of 2,654) of documents submitted on time and within word limits were processed in a timely manner, compared with 99 per cent in 2019, as shown in figure VIII. The rates changed, respectively, for New York, Vienna and Nairobi, from 100, 94 and 96 per cent in 2019, to 82, 84 and 99 per cent in 2020 and remained at 100 per cent in Geneva. Compliance with processing times was largely affected by the liquidity crisis, which prevented services from filling vacancies and contracting the temporary assistance usually employed each year. Regular staff stepped up to the challenge as reflected in the extraordinary increases in translation throughput productivity recorded in New York, Geneva and Vienna (see sect. III.C below).

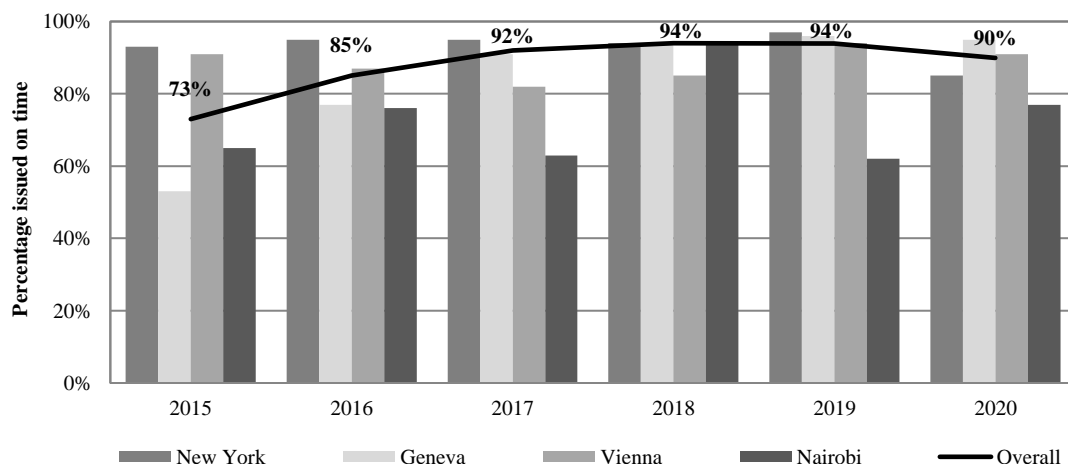
Figure VIII
Timely processing of slotted documents, 2015–2020



24. Overall compliance with issuance deadlines fell from 94 per cent in 2019 to 90 per cent in 2020 (see figure IX). As with the other indicators, timely issuance was in most cases adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. New York, for example, processed over a million and a half words related to COVID-19 on a priority basis, which took away resources from the production of other mandated documentation. Specifically, year on year, timely issuance declined from 97 per cent to 85 per cent in New York, from 96 per cent to 95 per cent in Geneva and from 94 per cent to 91 per cent in Vienna. Timely issuance in Nairobi improved over the same period, from 62 per cent to 77 per cent, but remained comparatively low largely owing to departmental corrections being received while documents were in process.

25. The established practice of staggering the submission of documents for intergovernmental bodies with long sessions, such as the Human Rights Council, continued throughout the year in Geneva. One report was issued late owing to its late submission; 13 out of the usual 16 General Assembly and Economic and Social Council supplements were issued on time. Two reports were not submitted for processing: the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Economic and Social Council. Only two sessions of the universal periodic review were held in 2020 owing to postponements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, 30 outcome reports were issued in 2020 instead of the 42 that had been planned. All reports were issued six weeks prior to the start of the session for which they were planned.

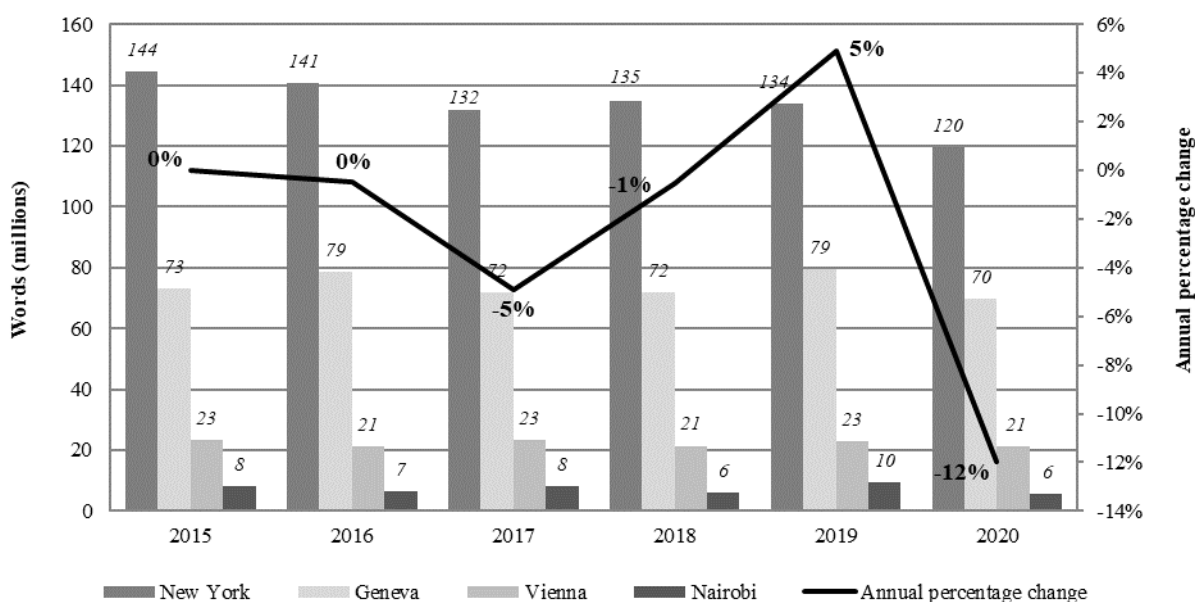
Figure IX
Timely issuance of slotted documents, 2015–2020



B. Control and limitation of documentation

26. The number of words submitted globally for translation decreased to just over 216 million in 2020 from over 245 million in 2019, as shown in figure X. The postponement or cancellation of meetings resulted in a reduction in the number of documents submitted for processing. At the same time, a substantial unexpected new workload was generated by documents related to COVID-19 that required rush processing.

Figure X
Translation workload, 2015–2020



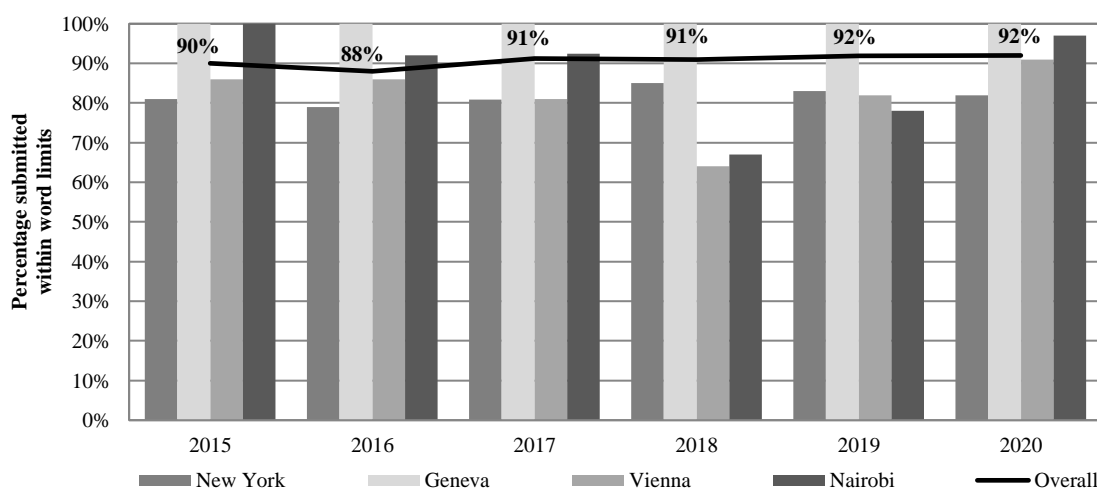
27. The proportion of documents submitted for processing within agreed word limits remained practically unchanged at 92 per cent (see figure XI). In New York,

the 2020 translation workload was over 119 million words compared with over 133 million in 2019. The percentage of slotted documents that complied with the agreed word limits decreased slightly, from 83 per cent in 2019 to 82 per cent in 2020. Consultations continued with author departments and offices to explore alternative options to ensure that Secretariat reports were kept within the mandated word limits.

28. Since 2012, Geneva has been strictly implementing the word limits for all slotted documents and monitoring submissions from the human rights treaty bodies for compliance with the word limits and the number of languages for translation, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 68/268. As in 2019, waivers were granted only for seven Joint Inspection Unit reports. In Vienna, the translation workload was consistent with historical patterns in 2020 and 91 per cent of documents complied with the word limits, despite a significant volume of the workload comprising documents of a legal nature that are exempt from length restrictions. In Nairobi the length of submissions by non-calendar bodies funded through extrabudgetary resources is not subject to controls. Earlier-than-usual slot dates were negotiated for budgetary and technical/legal documents that exceeded the mandated word limits.

Figure XI

Documents submitted for processing in line with the mandated or agreed word limits, 2015–2020



C. Productivity

29. The throughput productivity of the translation services, that is, the total number of words processed divided by the staff days spent translating them, for 2016–2020 is shown in table 2. Increased productivity was recorded at all duty stations except Nairobi, where the uncertainty in the calendar of meetings in the second quarter of the year in the wake of COVID-19 interruptions prevented optimum capacity planning or the immediate commitment of resources to workload-sharing. The productivity of the translation services has been trending upward for several years thanks to the deployment of the latest language technologies, the development of purpose-built tools, the introduction of new working methods and highest calibre and dedication of staff. The surge in 2020, however, was in part also due to the willingness of staff to forgo leave and put in extraordinary hours during the pandemic in support of the work of the United Nations at this critical time.

Table 2
Throughput productivity of the translation services, 2016–2020

(Pages per day)

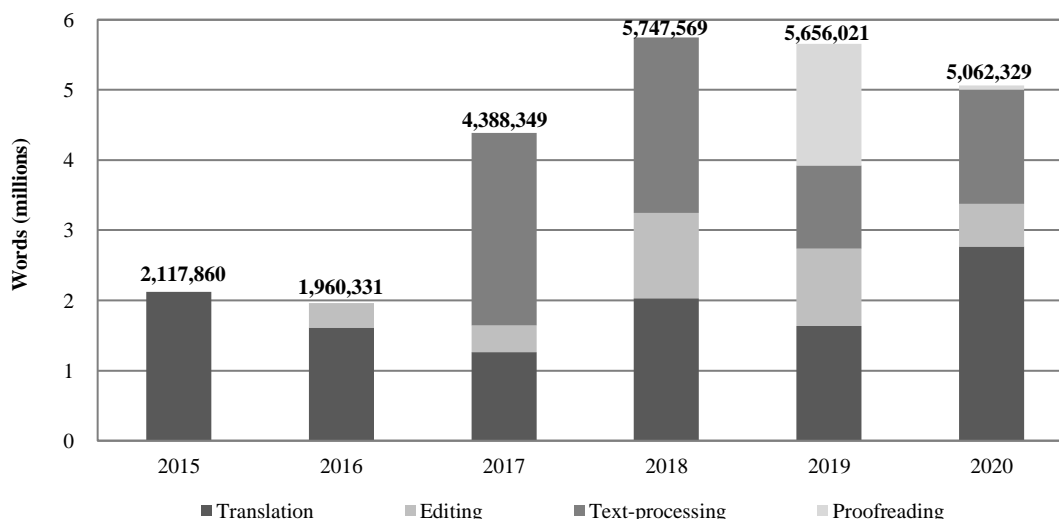
<i>Duty station</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>
New York	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.2	6.6
Geneva	5.1	5.0	5.3	5.5	5.8
Vienna	5.4	5.2	5.4	5.9	6.7
Nairobi	5.8	5.3	4.9	5.8	5.5

D. Workload sharing

30. The volume of workload shared among the duty stations is shown in figure XII. Workload sharing became an increasingly important tool for workload and capacity management in 2020 as hiring limitations generated imbalances in vacancy rates and volumes of work across the duty stations. The Chinese Translation Service in New York, for example, processed (translated, revised, formatted and proofread) 3,396 pages of workshare documents in 2020 (2,046 and 1,350 pages from the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna, respectively).

Figure XII

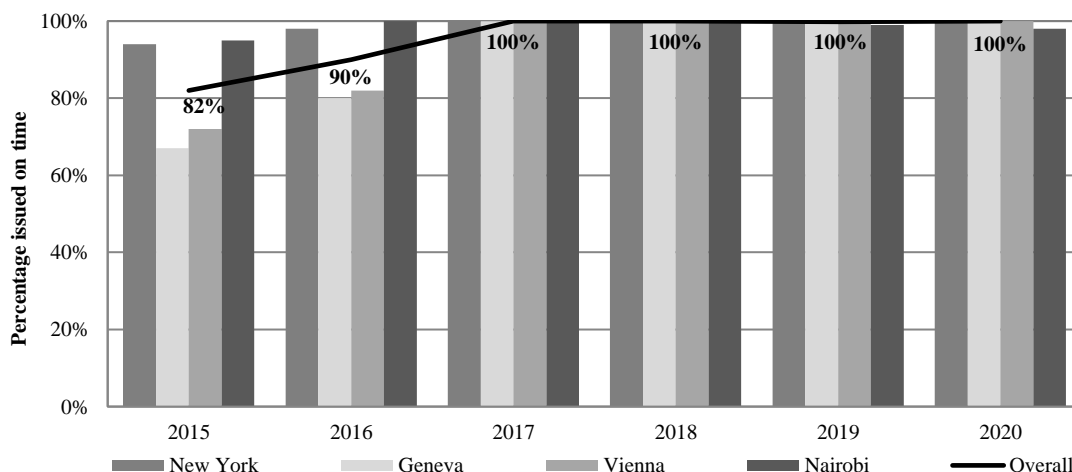
Workload-sharing among duty stations, 2015–2020, in words and by type



E. Simultaneous issuance of documents

31. One of the pillars of multilingualism is the simultaneous issuance of documents in the mandated official languages. Overall, full compliance was achieved with this mandate in 2020, as shown in figure XIII. Six documents (out of 243) were not issued simultaneously in Nairobi in accordance with a request from the secretariat of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (an extrabudgetary non-calendar body) to exceptionally waive the requirement for simultaneous distribution.

Figure XIII
Compliance with the simultaneous issuance requirements, 2015–2020



Issuance of verbatim and summary records

32. The timely and simultaneous issuance of verbatim records is to a large extent subject to the availability of temporary assistance. The staff resources of the Verbatim Reporting Service in New York have remained essentially unchanged for decades, whereas its workload has grown significantly, driven largely by the increased activity of the Security Council. The resulting 45 per cent capacity shortfall has had to be covered using temporary assistance or contractors. Owing to the liquidity crisis, however, temporary assistance was significantly reduced in 2019 and then halted in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic, resulting in an accumulating backlog.

33. The same situation arose with the production of summary records by the English Translation and Editorial Service in New York, which has for many years relied on temporary assistance to manage the annual surge in the précis-writing workload generated by the meetings of the Main Committees during the General Assembly session. The inability to hire the regular additional support resulted in far-later-than-usual issuance of summary records.

F. Digitization and uploading of important older United Nations documents

34. Through an additional contribution from the Government of Qatar, the Secretariat began a project to digitize seven decades of United Nations work and turn it into open knowledge in April 2020. During the year, an analysis of documents from 1945 to 1972 resulted in 40,000 documents being earmarked for enhancement through the embedding of additional metadata (e.g. agenda item, summary, speakers, adoption date and body), which will make their content more searchable and accessible and enable them to be repurposed for other uses as part of digital repositories.

35. To complete the scanning of older documents not digitized during the initial scanning project, the Department of Global Communications presented to the Committee on Information during its forty-third session a mass digitization and preservation project proposal prepared by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. The Department will continue to report regularly and extensively on digitization progress to the Committee.

G. New developments in documents management in 2020

36. The eLUNa computer-assisted translation tool and the suite of web-based applications developed by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to support documentation processing played a key role in allowing translators to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to eLUNa was provided to United Nations interpreters, as well as staff at the Department of Global Communications, to support the translation of materials related to COVID-19, and both eLUNa and the United Nations Terminology Database (UNTERM) were deployed at the World Health Organization (WHO). The technology behind eLUNa was applied to a new module, the eLUNa converter, in 2020 that automatically drafts content in the six official languages and compiles individually issued resolutions in XML format. Using this technology, the publication of volume I of the book of resolutions was brought forward from June to January in 2021. The resolutions in XML format are also made available to the public through a new machine-readability page in the website of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, together with interactive visualizations in the Microsoft Power BI tool that allow users to filter data by agenda item, Sustainable Development Goal, country, subject and Committee.

37. The four duty stations, the regional commissions and the organizations that host their terminology in the UNTERM portal (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Maritime Organization, WHO and the World Meteorological Organization) continued to coordinate terminology codification globally, based on their fields of specialization, to ensure harmonization of terms in all official languages. With the adoption of eLUNa and UNTERM by WHO, relevant terminology related to COVID-19 became available to all organizations and the general public in the six official languages, contributing to the quality and consistency of multilingual documentation across the United Nations system.

38. A self-paced online training tool, the SPOT, was launched in New York during the first weeks of telecommuting on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SPOT contains over 500 learning activities and resources, including lessons, quizzes and other materials, that were developed in-house in the six official languages by small teams in each translation service. The aim of the SPOT is to facilitate the effective sharing of knowledge among language staff and support their continuous professional development. The SPOT proved particularly useful for the cross-training of staff from other services or duty stations who were helping to process the extraordinary translation workload (see sect. IV), as well as for onboarding new recruits and conducting remote internships.

39. Quality assurance and control activities continued throughout 2020 despite the capacity shortages. Translation, editing and formatting work continued to be reviewed and checked using the established quality protocols. Staff mastered a range of new tools to support remote working, training and communications, and many aspects of the continuous learning and development necessary for language staff shifted to online mode. A new translation quality evaluation tool was developed to harmonize the review of individual jobs and the delivery of feedback to translators.

IV. Staffing

A. Vacancies, recruitment and outreach to potential applicants

40. The vacancy rates by duty station in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2020 are presented in table 3. The combined effects of the pandemic and the hiring

freeze created considerable disparities in the availability of staff in the language services throughout 2020, placing a disproportionate burden on staff in those with the higher workload-to-staff ratios. With the easing of the situation, actions are being taken in 2021 to restore the balance, but the pandemic remains an obstacle as some new recruits are not willing to travel and remote onboarding is not always appropriate.

Table 3

Vacancy rates in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2020

(Posts)

	<i>Headquarters</i>		<i>Geneva</i>		<i>Vienna</i>		<i>Nairobi</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Interpretation services	11	9	5	5	3	11	4	21
Translation services	52	16	18	10	2	4	3	14
Text-processing units	12	10	13	17	4	11	–	–
Editing services	5	21	3	14	1	20	–	–
Verbatim Reporting Service	1	2	–	–	–	–	–	–

41. The most notable increase in vacancy rates, compared with 2019, was in the Documentation Division in New York. Exceptionally, and as an emergency measure, temporary cross-functional assignments of interpreters or verbatim reporters to translation were arranged. The Department's new self-paced online training tool, the SPOT, proved particularly useful in familiarizing these colleagues with various aspects of the new functions they were performing. The capacity shortfalls of the Editing Section were addressed mainly through the ongoing training and cross-assignment of English translators/precis-writers and the temporary assignment of one English interpreter to editing duties. Arabists from the English Translation and Editorial Service in New York also provided the Verbatim Reporting Service with Arabic-English translations for the Security Council documents that have been replacing verbatim records during the pandemic.

Recruitment

42. Competitive examinations for language positions are scheduled in accordance with the succession planning needs of the different language services. A competitive examination for French interpreters and the first part of a combined competitive examination for Spanish translators, editors and verbatim reporters were held in 2020.

43. A process to establish a new single global roster of language professionals deemed suitable for employment by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management on a temporary or per-assignment basis was started in 2020. A review of the profiles of those already employed by the four duty stations is being finalized in 2021. Harmonized testing procedures were also agreed on for the future replenishment of the roster as required and were successfully piloted in an examination for placement on the global language roster for freelance French interpreters. With these reforms, there are now only two paths to employment as a language professional with the Secretariat: the competitive examinations for language positions and the examinations for placement on the global language roster for temporary or assignment work. This greatly simplifies procedures and, importantly, all recruitment examinations for language professionals are now advertised through Inspira and conducted entirely remotely, making them findable and accessible to all qualified candidates anywhere in the world. It is hoped that, together with targeted outreach, this will stimulate applications from various regions.

Outreach to potential applicants

44. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the hiring freeze on language services, skills-building and informational sessions continued to be delivered by language staff to potential applicants thanks to their prompt adjustment to working with remote communications tools. The temporary suspension of meetings with interpretation in the period from March to May 2020 allowed interpreters to devote time to developing learning resources and providing training to colleagues and potential applicants on a far larger scale than usual. As a result, the amount of staff time spent on outreach activities grew by 43 per cent compared with 2019, benefiting 66 training and professional institutions. The Department continued to use social media in the six official languages in support of its outreach programme. The number of its followers on Twitter and YouTube, for instance, increased during 2020 by 12.15 per cent and 51 per cent, respectively.

Outreach to Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean

45. The Secretariat continued its efforts to reach out to language professionals from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean in particular. An innovative cross-duty-station programme to help African candidates prepare for United Nations recruitment examinations was developed, and special measures were taken to promote the participation of Latin American and Caribbean candidates in the aforementioned combined competitive examination for Spanish translators, editors and verbatim reporters. Geographical diversity was taken into account in the selection of topics for the examination papers and, to ensure inclusivity, the instructions for candidates explicitly encouraged the use of any variety of Spanish and the graders received specific training and guidance regarding regional preferences, syntax and word choices. In addition, 20 informational sessions were organized with members of professional associations and universities in 17 countries in Latin America, and social media and the network of United Nations information centres in the region were leveraged to advertise the examination. The Spanish translation services also presented the Secretariat's outreach programme to 40 regional academic institutions at the third Biannual International Congress of the Latin American Network of Translation and Interpretation Studies and organized a series of monthly informational sessions on language professions at the United Nations for approximately 25 universities and institutions in Latin America, reaching approximately 900 students and faculty across the region.

46. A special session on the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation was held in October 2020 under the auspices of the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications to review the achievements of the first phase of the project, explore future possibilities and obtain the support of the Annual Meeting member organizations for further cooperation in the training of interpreters and translators in Africa. Five African universities representing Africa's main geographical and linguistic regions received support under the project and now have sufficient training capacity and adequate equipment and facilities to teach interpreting and translation in compliance with international standards. Overall, 282 students benefited in the first phase, which ended in August 2020, either through direct receipt of funding or through training, facilities and equipment procured through the Consortium's funding. In total, 244 direct bursaries were provided for tuition and 151 students received direct support for internships or work placements. As an outcome of the Annual Meeting, a communication signed by the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Acting Director General for Interpretation and the Director General for Translation of the European Commission (co-sponsors of the first phase) was sent in March 2021 to all member

organizations seeking expressions of interest that will initiate further dialogue on the next steps. A separate letter was sent to the permanent representatives of the African States Members of the United Nations based in Nairobi.

Internships

47. Owing to the pandemic, the number of interns hosted by language services dropped significantly in 2020 (34 interns, compared with 80 in 2019). Of these, 85.3 per cent were current students or recent graduates of partner universities. Efforts towards Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean were also affected by pandemic-related limitations: 32.4 per cent of all interns hosted by United Nations language services in 2020 were nationals of Africa or Latin America and the Caribbean, compared with nearly 40 per cent in 2019. A number of remote practicums, including with students from four universities in Latin America, were arranged. The funding of internships or the creation of paid traineeships would greatly increase access of young professionals from less-well-represented regions to on-site practical work experience at the United Nations.

B. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff

48. Although far fewer meetings were held in 2020 than usual, meetings management operations became exceedingly complex during the pandemic. Servicing virtual and hybrid meetings with remote simultaneous interpretation on a scale never seen before placed additional strain on meetings staff.

49. The working environment of interpreters underwent dramatic changes as remote simultaneous interpretation was implemented both in co-located (from United Nations premises) and in dispersed (from home) modes. A reduced daily/weekly workload was implemented owing to the additional cognitive load and the potential health hazard posed by poor and uneven sound quality. During the suspension of activities, interpreters played an active role in the testing of remote simultaneous interpretation platforms.

50. The main impact of COVID-19 on the working environment of the translation services was that mandatory teleworking caused an abrupt end to the collegial way in which they usually operate. The pandemic has underscored the extent to which in-person interaction among members of translation services contributes to their continuous professional development and their morale. Although online tools were quickly made available to enable all activities, including training, consultation and feedback sessions, the richness and rewarding nature of United Nations translation work and the associated meaningful flow of information and knowledge cannot be wholly recreated in a virtual environment. Most acknowledge that, despite best efforts, contact decreased, networks and team bonds weakened and knowledge was not passed on as effectively.

V. Facilities and accessibility

A. Facilities

51. In section XIV of its resolution [74/263](#), the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to conduct a needs assessment and explore options that maximize efficiency and cost-effectiveness, taking into consideration the future needs of the United Nations Office at Nairobi conference facilities, and to submit a report to the Assembly at its seventy-fifth session. In his report ([A/75/716](#)), the Secretary-General presented two options to meet immediate and future requirements in terms of capacity

and outlined the general direction in which the construction project would address the deteriorating conditions. While the possible construction project materializes, the Office is monitoring and improving the Wi-Fi coverage at the conference facility and addressing information security vulnerabilities identified in a recent audit. It is also procuring spare parts that are anticipated to be required until the construction project ends.

B. Accessibility

52. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management continued its collaboration with the Department of Operational Support and the Office of Information and Communications Technology to provide captioning and remote sign language interpretation to meetings entitled to such services and to extrabudgetary clients upon request. An online request form was launched in the first quarter of 2020 in New York to facilitate requests for services. This proved particularly timely when in-person visits were ended by the lockdown that forced the Accessibility Centre at United Nations Headquarters to remain closed. The Meetings Support Section continued to facilitate Braille printing, however, and accessible seating arrangements in the meeting rooms remained operational throughout the year. The successful piloting of remote sign language services in previous years helped to ensure accessibility at the New York-based meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women and the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the disability-related meetings organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

53. In Geneva, real-time captioning services were provided for 53 meetings and sign language interpretation was arranged for 21 meetings in 2020. To comply with the COVID-19 measures, for the first time sign language interpreters worked in a fully remote manner. Eight fully accessible panels of the Human Rights Council were successfully serviced. This included combining multiple platforms for each meeting (Skype, Webex, Interprefy and Zoom), using pre-recorded video statements where possible, as well as the full United Nations Office at Geneva television capacity. A fully virtual session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was also successfully serviced over the Interprefy remote simultaneous interpretation platform, with English captioning provided to all closed meetings and sign language interpretation for the opening and closing meetings. The new tool for generating seating charts introduced in Geneva presents visualizations of various amenities in each room, including accessibility features. Seating charts can be printed in large formats in high quality and displayed near conference room entrances to help delegates find their seats easily.

54. Although virtual meeting platforms designed for remote interpretation presented an unprecedented way of accessing meetings remotely, they did not possess full accessibility features for screen readers. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management reached out to individual technology providers explaining the need to include universal design in their development and to remediate code so as to give independent access to persons with disabilities. Remote simultaneous interpretation platform providers responded with accelerated road maps for accessibility, which still need time to be accomplished.

55. In 2020, Geneva produced digital recordings of 1,131 meetings; Vienna of 114 meetings; and Nairobi of 212 meetings. In Vienna, formal and informal meetings are digitally recorded upon request by the client. Three intergovernmental bodies receive digital recordings by default as a replacement for unedited transcripts. In New York, all open formal meetings are recorded by default in the media asset management system. In addition, during 2020 the Department of Global Communications provided

directly to a global audience through its United Nations Web TV website (webtv.un.org) live webcast coverage of United Nations meetings and events, including a total of 10,198 webcast recordings. The Department is committed to multilingualism and is making great efforts to address disparity between the six official languages. In that connection, the Department is in the process of recruiting multilingual staff who will be responsible for the live and on-demand webcast coverage and related metadata of open, numbered General Assembly, Security Council and Economic and Social Council meetings, in all six official languages. The Department is also currently working on the redesign and development of the new United Nations Web TV website in the six official languages. The English language version of the website was launched in June 2021, with other official language versions to follow.

VI. Enhancing integrated global management and measuring the quality of conference services

56. On 3 February 2021, the Secretary-General promulgated a bulletin on the organization of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management ([ST/SGB/2021/3](#)), which replaced his previous bulletin [ST/SGB/2005/9](#). The new bulletin reflects the guidance provided in General Assembly resolution [57/283 B](#) (section II.B, paragraph 7), in particular that while the Department is responsible for the implementation of policy, the formulation of standards and guidelines, overseeing and coordinating United Nations conference services and the overall management of resources under the relevant budget section, the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi remain responsible and accountable for day-to-day operational activities. It further provides that the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management is responsible for guiding integrated global conference management involving Headquarters and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, which includes the establishment of conference management policies and standards and the allocation of the resources and capacity of the conference-servicing operations in order to ensure optimal delivery of the conference-servicing workload at the four duty stations. The Department is responsible for providing policy guidance with regard to utilizing the apportioned parts of such resources that are under the authority of the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, with a view to achieving the highest possible level of cohesion, synergy and efficiency.

57. The bulletin applies in conjunction with bulletin [ST/SGB/2015/3](#), as well as in conjunction with the Secretary-General's bulletins establishing the organizational structure of the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Once the new bulletins describing the organization of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi are promulgated (all of them were under various stages of review as of the date of issuance of the present report), the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management will convene a coordination meeting with the respective Directors-General to review the specific division of labour and conference management policy matters in order to align them with the delegation of authority framework established as part of the Secretary-General's management reform, with a view to enhancing the integrated global management of the Secretariat's conference services.

58. To monitor the provision of high-quality conference services to Member States, the Secretariat collects feedback through annual informational meetings held at the four duty stations, ad hoc surveys and the global e-survey that is available throughout the year in the six official languages. In January 2021, delegations were invited to

provide their feedback through an upgraded version of the e-survey that was made available on the e-deleGATE portal and included new questions regarding services provided during the pandemic in 2020. Efforts to publicize the survey, including through announcements in the *Journal of the United Nations* and the One-Stop Shop, resulted in 213 responses being collected in 2020 compared with 30 in the 2019 survey: 86 per cent of respondents rated the conference services provided as either “good” or “very good” in 2020, compared with 90 per cent in 2019. The 17 respondents to a survey of bureau members of the Main Committees in New York rated the overall quality of the assistance provided by secretariats as “very good”. Meanwhile 12 compliments and 2 complaints were received through the feedback database that is maintained independently from the e-survey.

59. In Geneva, 13 of the 15 respondents to a local survey rated conference services there as “good” or “very good” overall in 2020. In addition, 15 compliments and no complaints were received from clients for the meetings held that year. In Vienna, over 90 per cent of the 76 respondents to an interactive client satisfaction survey administered during in-person meetings in the period from January to March 2020 rated the interpretation and translation services provided as either “good” or “very good”. In Nairobi, two surveys were carried out that included questions on experience with the three remote simultaneous interpretation platforms used. The ratings awarded in the 77 responses received ranged from “average” to “very good”. Only one negative comment was received in relation to the time it took for the floor to be given to a participant. No complaints were received in terms of the conference services provided.

Informational meetings with delegations in 2020

60. All the informational meetings with delegations organized by the four conference-servicing duty stations in 2020 were held online or in hybrid mode and focused on the action taken by the conference services to ensure business continuity and uphold multilingualism during the conditions created by the pandemic, the sudden shift to remote operations, the limitations of the technical infrastructure and the available solutions, and the restrictions on hiring. Representatives of Member States expressed their appreciation for the efforts made by the meetings and documentation services in that regard.

Quality control of interpretation services

61. The quality of interpretation, whether provided by freelance or staff interpreters, is rigorously and continuously monitored at all four duty stations. Overall responsibility for the output of each booth lies with the corresponding section chief. A team leader is assigned to monitor the performance of all team members during each meeting. Performance is also monitored after meetings using recordings. Coaching and terminology reviews take place as necessary. Staff interpreters are evaluated by the chief of section and other senior interpreters through the Organization’s performance management system. Freelance interpreters are formally evaluated on a yearly basis and their performance record is taken into consideration in the renewal of contracts. Recent innovations in this area include the design and publication of a set of online evaluation tools, one for staff and one for freelancers, at the United Nations Office at Geneva in response to a recommendation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the assessment of interpretation issued as part of its 2019 audit of the Interpretation Service in Geneva. The evaluation tool for staff fosters quality-related discussions between managers and staff members and directly dovetails with the new 2021/22 performance management approach, which is founded on continuous dialogue. The tool for freelancers is based on performance at each

meeting and provides an at-a-glance overview of the general performance of a particular freelance interpreter, with access to specific details as may be required for remedial purposes.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

62. The business continuity achieved by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in 2020 was the result of the culture of innovation it has deliberately fostered, its investments in language and other technologies over the past few decades, its policy of continuous improvement and modernization and, above all, the willingness of its staff to break new ground and rise to the occasion by forgoing leave and working longer hours under far from ideal conditions during a prolonged and extremely stressful period. Clearly this crisis mode of operations is neither ideal nor sustainable. The Department has demonstrated that it has the tools and the agility to switch to fully remote operations during an emergency and is in excellent condition in terms of disaster preparedness. The new working methods and formats employed in 2020 (virtual meetings, teleworking and remote simultaneous interpretation) bring with them clear benefits, such as the possibility of reducing travel and increasing accessibility to meetings and various services to delegations. At the same time, some significant challenges were identified, such as the ability to ensure continuous learning and support the work-life balance of staff.

63. Another matter of note is that the continued restrictions on the filling of vacancies and the use of external capacity to manage absences and workload surges in 2020 had as much of an impact on operations as the COVID-19 pandemic, if not a greater one, especially in the translation services. The timely delivery and simultaneous issuance of quality documentation in all six official languages depends on the allocation of sufficient resources to ensure the required capacity levels to process the significant volumes involved. Output can be expected to decline in the short and medium terms if services are forced to rely only on internal capacity and curtail critical activities such as continuous professional development, succession planning and quality assurance.

B. Action recommended of the General Assembly

64. The Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly:

- (a) Take note of the present report;
- (b) Consider the calendar of conferences and meetings on an annual basis, in line with the budget cycle, and request the Secretary-General to present future calendars on an annual basis, at least for the duration of the trial annual budget period stipulated in Assembly resolution [72/266 A](#).