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PERIODICITY OF ORDINARY MEETINGS OF THE
CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

Note by the Interim Secretariat

1. INTRODUCTION

1. According to Article 23, paragraph 1, of the Convention, "ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties shall be held at regular intervals to be determined by the Conference at its first meeting". It may be noted that Article 23, paragraph 2, provides that the Conference of the Parties can hold extraordinary meetings at such other times as may be deemed necessary.

2. The Committee may wish to make recommendations to the Conference of the Parties on the periodicity of ordinary meetings. In doing so, the Committee may note that rule 4, paragraph 1, of the revised draft rules of procedure for the Conference of the Parties (UNEP/CBD/IC/2/3) states: "Ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties shall be held once every year, unless the Conference of the Parties decides otherwise.". In addition, the Committee may wish to take the following into consideration: (a) nature and volume of business that the Conference of the Parties has to undertake; (b) existence, functions and operation of subsidiary bodies to be established by the Conference of the Parties; (c) arrangements between the Conference of the Parties and the institutional structure operating the financial mechanism; (d) organization of the meetings and participation costs; (e) secretariat capacity; and (f) evolution of the Convention.

3. The present note is intended to facilitate the Committee's discussion of the subject. The note briefly reviews the practice adopted by other conventions.

2. PRACTICE UNDER OTHER CONVENTIONS

4. The Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution (Barcelona Convention) provides for the election of a Bureau. In addition the Convention provides for the establishment of two technical committees that are open to representatives of all Contracting Parties: the Scientific and Technical and the Socio-economic Committee. The ordinary meetings of the Contracting Parties are held once every two years.

5. The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn Convention) has a seven-member Standing Committee and a Scientific Council established by the Conference of the Parties. The latter consists of experts appointed by individual member States and by the Conference of the Parties. The ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention are held at intervals not exceeding three years.

6. The Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) appoints a Standing Committee, which serves as the Bureau at meetings of the Conference. It also appoints four other committees - the Animals Committee, the Plants Committee, the Identification Manual Committee and the Nomenclature Committee - all reporting to the Conference of the Parties at its meetings and, if so requested, to the Standing Committee between meetings. Members of the Standing Committee are elected and those of the Animals and Plants Committees are chosen to reflect major geographic regions, while membership of the Identification Manual Committee and the Nomenclature Committee is on a voluntary basis. The ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties are held once every two years.

7. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention) has two subsidiary bodies: a Standing Committee and a Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). The Standing Committee meets annually and is composed of representatives and alternate representatives of each of the seven Ramsar regions of the world. Upon the approval of the Standing Committee, STRP consists of one expert nominated by each of the seven regions. In future, STRP members will be appointed by the Conference of the Parties at intervals of not more than three years.

8. The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) has a three-member Bureau which meets twice a year. There are four technical committees open to all Parties and selected observers, which meet once every two years. The Contracting Parties meet every year.

9. Overview. All conventions reviewed above have a "standing committee" which acts as the "senior" committee while technical committees concentrate on more specific, often scientific matters. A common practice is for technical committees to meet once a year. Standing committees - which are usually elected- meet at least once every two years to conduct inter-sessional business. The size of standing committees tends to be small (6-9 persons). Some technical committees are open to all members, while others are limited to a smaller number of participants chosen by Contracting Parties, sometimes on a regional basis.

10. The periodicity of meetings of the parties and the standing and technical committees of a few selected conventions is set out in tabular form in the annex to the present report.

3. CONSIDERATIONS

11. In considering the question of the periodicity of ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the Intergovernmental Committee may wish to take into account the following factors:

(a) Nature and volume of business. If the volume of business in the initial years is very large or if the agenda is complex, frequent meetings of the Conference of the Parties may be desirable;

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(b) Number of subsidiary bodies and scope of their functions:

- (i) While addressing the question of the periodicity of ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the Committee may wish to consider how the work of the Conference can be advanced through the setting up of subsidiary body or bodies. Article 25, paragraph 1, of the Convention establishes a Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) and under Article 23, paragraph 4 (g), the Conference may establish such other subsidiary bodies as are deemed necessary for the implementation of the Convention. The functions of the subsidiary body or bodies may thus have some bearing on how often the Conference of the Parties will meet (see also the note by the Interim Secretariat on Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice: functions, terms of reference, organization and operation (UNEP/CBD/IC/2/19));
- (ii) If the Parties wish to extend close policy guidance to the institutional structure operating the financial mechanism, possible options include frequent meetings of the Conference of the Parties or the establishment of a subsidiary body, under Article 23, paragraph 4 (g), for this particular purpose. The nature of arrangements established between the Conference of the Parties and the institutional structure chosen to operate the financial mechanism will influence the periodicity of meetings. However, the need for frequent meetings on this account may be less if the task of giving effect to the guidance is delegated to a subsidiary body created/established for this purpose¹ (see also the note by the Interim Secretariat on institutional structure to operate the financial mechanism under the Convention (UNEP/CBD/IC/2/9));

(c) Cost. The costs of organization and participation could be a major factor in deciding upon the periodicity of the meetings of the Conference of the Parties. Frequent meetings entail high costs. Inability to raise the required funding for travel by representatives from developing countries might cause inadequate participation by those countries. Where the financial costs of attending meetings are borne by participants, most Contracting Parties may send only one representative who would have to deal with all aspects, whether scientific, legal, financial or administrative. This may reduce the effectiveness of the discussions. Some agendas may require simultaneous work in two sessional committees. In such a case, a delegation should ideally consist of at least two persons, for example, one person competent in scientific matters and the other specialized in financial and legal matters. Availability of additional funds to support the participation of developing countries can help overcome this problem, if meetings are to be frequent;

¹ For example, the Second Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in 1990, established an Executive Committee, which meets at least twice a year, to develop and monitor the implementation of specific operational policies, guidelines and administrative arrangements including the disbursement of resources, for the purpose of achieving the objectives of the Multilateral Fund under the Financial Mechanism. Ordinary meeting of the Parties of the Montreal Protocol are held once every year.

(d) Secretariat capacity. Preparation of conference documentation by the secretariat, including their translation, printing and dispatch requires several months. Standard rules of procedure require documents to be dispatched six weeks prior to the meeting in question. This "six-week rule" for distribution of documents prior to a meeting together with the logistical constraints imposed by translation into the official languages and reproduction mean that at least six months lead-time is required to effectively plan and organize major meetings. Besides meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the secretariat might also have to service meetings of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) and such other subsidiary bodies in addition to organizing technical and administrative seminars and workshops. Efficient management of numerous meetings in addition to its other activities is positively correlated with secretariat capacity. Any decision on periodicity of meetings of the Conference of the Parties, taken along with decisions about other subsidiary bodies, the scope of their functions and frequency of their meetings, will require consideration of the impacts on secretariat staffing, and the consequent costs to Parties;

(e) Evolution of the Convention. To speed up policy development and facilitate implementation of the Convention by Parties, it might be preferable for the Conference of the Parties to meet on an annual basis. If protocols are to be developed, annual meetings would facilitate this process.

4. CONCLUSIONS

12. The Committee may wish to consider three possible options for the periodicity of meetings of the Conference of the Parties:

(a) To meet annually. This will imply a higher cost for the organization of meetings and participation in them. The financial burden on each Contracting Party will be higher than if option (b) below were chosen. However, a larger volume of business could be handled annually;

(b) To meet every two/three years;

(c) To meet annually for the first two years and thereafter, meet every two/three years. Annual meetings in the initial years would offer an opportunity for expediting policy development and facilitating implementation of the Convention by Parties. After the initial work is cleared, or after more work is delegated to SBSTTA and perhaps other subsidiary bodies created, the Conference of the Parties may decide to meet at less frequent intervals. Travel and meeting costs would be higher than in option (b) above in the first two years.

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Annex

SELECTED CONVENTIONS: MEMBERSHIP AND FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

	No. of Parties	Ordinary meetings of Parties (in years)	Bureau/Standing Committee		Technical Committee(s)	
			Size	Frequency (in years)	Frequency (in years)	Number
Barcelona	20	2	6	2	2	2
CITES	120	2 1/2	9	2	1	4
CMS (Bonn)	44	2 1/2 - 3	7	1	1	1
Ramsar	80	3	20	1	1	1
Bern	30	1	3	2	2	4

Barcelona: Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution (Barcelona, 1976)
 CITES: Convention on International trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Washington, 1973)
 CMS (Bonn): Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn, 1979)
 Ramsar: Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar, 1971)
 Bern: Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern, 1979)
