CEB
Chief Executives Board
for Coordination

High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM)

Aligning and Coordinating
UN System's Return to Office

Special Virtual Session, 5 June 2020

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I   Context

1. As some organizations are already starting to move back to their premises, and others are finalizing their plans to do so, the High Level Committee on Management (HLCM) met on 5 June 2020 to **discuss how best a coordinated approach could be achieved, ensuring the maximum   collaboration and alignment in managing this process**.

2. The rich interaction and exchange of information among Committee members demonstrated the need and willingness of the UN system to align on going back to premises in the wake of COVID-19. The Committee received a presentation from the HLCM Chair on the Back to Office plan for UN City Copenhagen, which hosts 11 UN agencies in two campuses, in addition to UNICEF's global supply hub and warehouse, one of the world's largest humanitarian warehouses. HLCM members also benefitted from in-depth contributions from the UN Secretariat (NY), FAO (Rome), as well as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Washington).

3. The Committee's discussion also had active participation from the staff federations (CCISUA, FICSA and UNISERV), the International Civil Service Commission, and the UN Development Cooperation Office.

4. The analysis of Back to Office plans shared by HLCM members before the session showed a considerable level of consistency in their structure, guiding principles, and adopted measures. Across the board, the three pillars around which all plans are developed are:

    A.   Prioritizing the safety and health of UN personnel/delegates
    B.   Strictly adhering to the provisions and guidelines of the World Health Organization
    C.   Applying the norms and restrictions put forward by the respective Local Authorities

5. While pillars #A and #B are conducive to a broad coherence of approaches across the UN system, pillar #C is naturally context-specific and leads to some differences, mostly with respect to the timing of the various phases along which the Back to Office process is normally organized.

6. HLCM focused its discussion on a number of issues related to Back to Office planning across the UN system, including:

a. **Safety and security of personnel and delegates at the premises**: The well-being and health of UN personnel and delegates is at the centre of all Back to Office Plans. Participants confronted themselves on measures put in place at the workplace: from those applied across the board – e.g. adjustments to office layouts, maximum space occupancy, use of elevators, barriers, disinfection, etc. – to those where different approaches had been adopted, such as personal protective equipment, temperature scanning, rotation/shifts/staggered working hours, etc.

b. **Psychological well-being and mental health of UN personnel**: Physical security is only one part of the Back to Office process. Preventing and addressing psychological distress features prominently in the plans put in place by all organizations. Participants discussed measures to provide for a people-centered, safe workplace, including those focusing on mental health – psychological support, communication, guidance on dealing with uncertainty, loss and grief – and work-life balance, such as caring for children and elders, being sick at home, etc.

c. **Triggers for the different phases of Back to Office plans**: Back to Office plans are mostly structured around different phases, which depend upon a set of triggers or indicators. Most common are compliance with regulations from Local Authorities and epidemiological data and trends. Some organizations have nevertheless considered more specific triggers: availability of testing/tracing, availability of local health, transport and other services, etc.

d. **Criteria for voluntary / mandatory re-entry**: Similarly, organizations have adopted different approaches for identifying groups of staff to return to the office, which change depending on the phase. In some cases, return to office is strictly on a voluntary basis, while in others it is mandatory. Some autonomy is often left to individual teams/managers to organize their return.

e. **Meetings**: After having successfully ensured business continuity with all/most staff working remotely, organizations are now considering ways to resume meetings with Member States and other stakeholders. Reduced schedules, physical distancing, limits to number of participants, and several other measures are being put in place for this phase of return to office. Technology-related considerations, such as tele-conferencing, remote interpretation, etc. are central to this discussion.

f. **Headquarter vs Field duty stations**: Organizations are all adapting their Back to Office plans to the extremely varied contexts of their numerous field offices, while at the same time maintaining consistency in the adopted approach and criteria. Participants shared their considerations on how this delicate balance is being ensured.

II   Common principles

7. While situations differ in the various duty stations across the globe, the discussion clearly illustrated organizations are approaching the return to office in a largely consistent manner:

8. The **safety and health** of staff and delegates on premises are put above anything else. Respecting the guidelines of the WHO and following advice and restrictions from local authorities serve as guideposts for each entity.

9. The centrality of **a people-centered and inclusive approach** that considers the different impact of COVID-19 for different groups was emphasized by the Committee. The need to give due attention to inclusivity in approaches to phased re-entry was also highlighted, as the pandemic may affect people differently. Gender roles and norms, safe transport and the gender balance in teams were among the issues cited as meriting special attention.

10. All organizations are adopting a **multistage approach** in their back to office plans, with different phases depending on the trajectory of the pandemic. A particularly interesting approach was outlined by the World Bank, which developed a matrix with built-in triggers and mitigating factors that was initially conceived for headquarters and was then expanded to also cater for field locations.

11. While UN Geneva reported its readiness to **host in-person inter-governmental meetings** with up to 300 participants, in accordance with the provisions of the Swiss Authorities, some stark differences of views are emerging on the subject. Twenty-six Member States sent a Note Verbale to the Director General of UNOG urging to avoid holding physical meetings of the Human Rights Council, and instead conduct such meetings virtually.

III   Priority issues going forward

12. HLCM further identified issues of system-wide importance that will need particular attention:

13. The Committee noted that **adoption and alignment of plans for field duty stations** was of primary importance. Organizations are adapting their Back to Office plans to the extremely varied contexts of their field offices, while at the same time maintaining consistency in their approaches and criteria. Going forward, Committee members noted the importance of giving the necessary attention to the perspectives and expectations of field offices, and recognized that while consistency in planning and executing the return to office is important, flexibility to adapt to local circumstances and tailored approaches are necessary and inevitable.

14. The impact of the pandemic on the **mental health of staff members** was noted across the board and acknowledged as a critical issue. While some organizations have deployed tools to balance work and home life, the need to increase communication, including stress counselling, was highlighted, along with the value of pooling existing resources to ensure more impactful action in this area. Several participants underscored that the Secretary-General's Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy was a crucial component to further these efforts. The staff federations welcomed the attention to this important area and highlighted the importance of committing adequate human and financial resources to effectively address this issue.

15. The **gender dimension** is of particular importance when considering back to office arrangements, as the burden for family and house work disproportionately falls on women, and that has increased exponentially as a result of school closures and the need of caring for the ill. It remains of utmost importance to acknowledge the prevalence of such circumstances and the need for managers to support staff with all available tools, such as parental leave etc., allowing the necessary flexibility, as well as to promote gender-neutral role modelling.

16. Discussing the impact on ways of working in the UN system post-pandemic, some Committee members asked if the ICSC was considering **reviewing the compensation system** in order to support organizational needs for managers and staff. The post pandemic world will bring new challenges to the UN system. Organizations have started to adapt their human resources policies and would soon look, with the support of ICSC, into adapting and modernizing their compensation system, catering for a model where some or most staff would not be installed in any particular location, and work could be done from anywhere.

17. Lastly, HLCM recognized that **business continuity** for our beneficiaries and stakeholders has been assured as a response to the pandemic in a very effective manner, and Committee members committed to continue to work together to ensure a coherent approach for the return to offices.

IV   Next steps

18. To complement the discussion on common principles, measures and approaches adopted by the UN system for the return to offices process, the HLCM Secretariat launched a survey to gather basic facts and figures from the Back to Office plans across the system. The resulting document, with a **summary of basic facts and figures from the Back to Office plans across the system,** is available in Annex I, and will be continuously updated in the coming months.

V   Annex I – Basic facts and figures

COVID-19: Aligning and Coordinating UN System's Return to Office

Basic facts and figures

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Note: sources of data

The information presented below was gathered from two main sources:

1. Back to office plans, as provided by HLCM members;

2. A short questionnaire (annex 1) submitted by the HLCM Secretariat in May 2020 to all its members, as well as to Regional Commissions.

The HLCM Secretariat received responses from 22 of the HLCM members to the questionnaire, as well as from all five Regional Commissions.

1 Phased approach

Based on the existing Back to Office plans, as well as the survey results, it is evident that the vast majority of entities are approaching the return to the office with a phased approach. As can be seen in Figure 1, roughly half of Headquarter offices are planning to return to office in four phases, while the other half has either planned for a two or three phased approach. This is true also for the Regional Commissions, which have outlined either two or three distinct phases within their Back to Office plans.

Figure 1. Number of phases in Back to Office plans
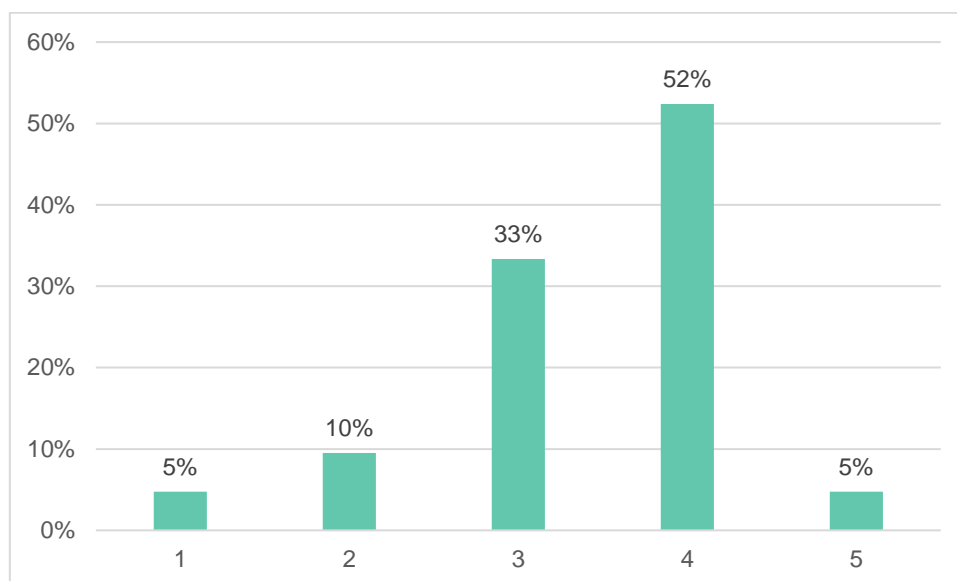
However, as illustrated in Figure 2, at this time several entities are still unable to provide information about specific start/end dates for later phases. This is due to the fact that many entities are relying on indications from local authorities, or still lack the necessary evidence and data to take a decision.

Figure 2.Percentage of entities with defined start/end date per each phase[1]
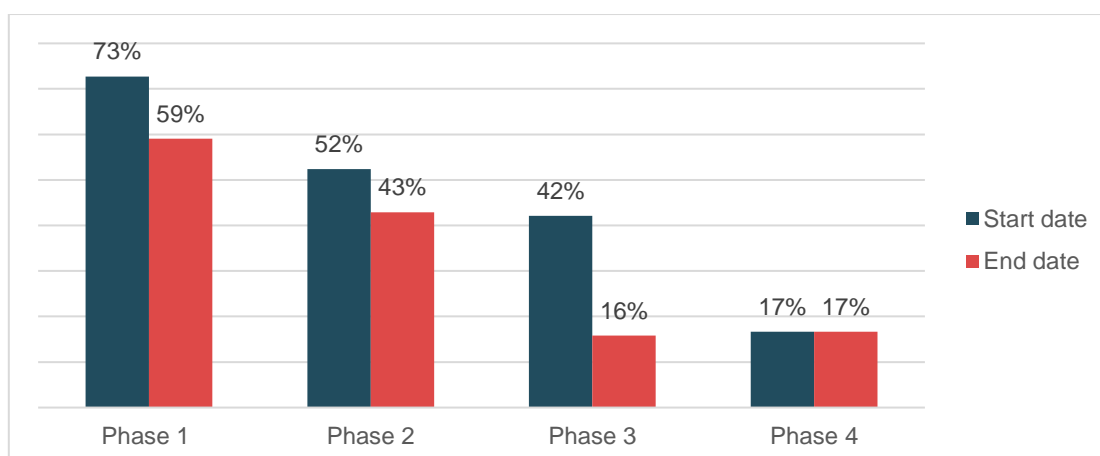
[1] NB: from Figure 2 onwards, phase five is excluded for better clarity, as it only applies to UN Bonn.

1.1. Occupancy rates

Data on the evolution of occupancy rates across phases is varied and strongly dependent on the local context. All HQs and Regional Commissions plan to be gradually returning to office during the summer or in early autumn. All entities have consistently adopted a phased approach, with an increasing occupancy rate in each phase, but many will define exact applicable dates as context evolves.

1.1.1. Occupancy data for HQ locations

Table 1. Occupancy rates across phases phases, by duty-station/organization (2020)

Location	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.
Amman (UNRWA)	0%		10%		TBD			
Bonn	2%		10%	40%	TBD			
Copenhagen (UN City)	On-site required personnel		10%	30%	50%	65%	TBD	
Geneva								
ILO	On-site required personnel		80 ppl.	150 ppl.	25%	TBD		
UNOG	On-site required personnel			30%	>30%	TBD		
UNHCR/UNAIDS	On-site required personnel		20%		TBD			
WIPO	On-site required personnel			200 ppl.	TBD			
WHO	On-site required personnel		13%		TBD			
UNEP	1%			20%	TBD			
London (IMO)	On-site required personnel			10%	25%	TBD		
Montreal (ICAO)	On-site required personnel		30%		TBD			
Nairobi (UNON-UNEP-UN Habitat)	1%						40%	TBD
New York								
UNHQ/UN Women/UNDP/UNFPA	On-site required personnel				Four phases: gradual increase from 10% to 40% occupancy, then TBD			
UNICEF	On-site required personnel		5%			10%	20%	40%
Paris (UNESCO)	On-site required personnel		10%	20%	TBD			
Rome								
IFAD	On-site required personnel			50 ppl.	100 ppl.	TBD		
WFP	On-site required personnel		3%	10%	TBD			
FAO	On-site required personnel		3%	11%	50%			
Vienna (VIC)	On-site required personnel		20%	50%	TBD			
Washington DC (WB/IMF)	On-site required personnel	<1%			TBD			

In general, as illustrated in Figure 3, in the first phases, apart from a very small fraction of on-site required personnel who are mandatorily required to be at the premises, most plans provide for personnel to start coming to work on a voluntary basis and subject to exigencies of service. As occupancy rates increase in later phases the trend is for organizations to mandatorily require personnel to return to premises, within the limit of occupancy set for the respective phase. At the same time, in later phases the voluntary vs. mandatory nature of return is still subject to consideration by several entities.

Figure 3. Percentage of entities that opt for voluntary vs mandatory return of staff to office, per phases
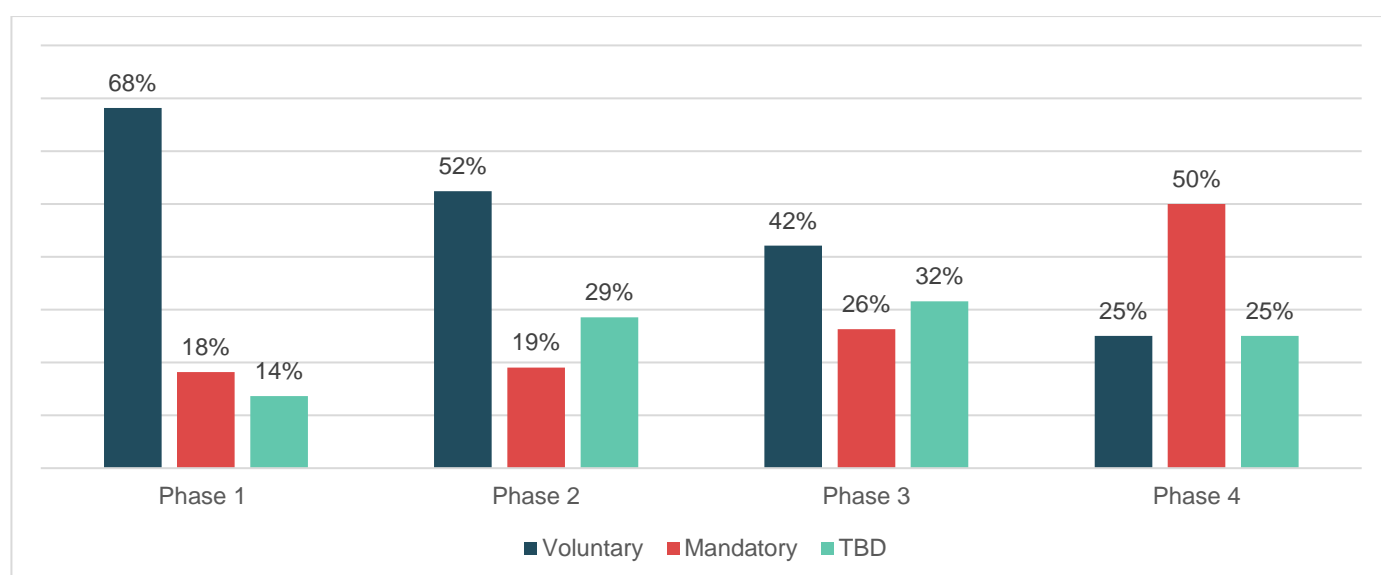
1.1.2. Occupancy data for Field Offices and Regional Commissions

Only 12 entities out of the 22 that responded to the survey reported data for both HQ and field offices. Seven of these reported that field offices were expected to follow indications from local authorities, the UN Country Team or provisions from HQ. Data for field offices other than Regional Commissions is therefore not included in the table below.

Table 2. Occupancy rates across phases*, by Regional Commission (2020)

Location	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
Bangkok (ESCAP)	On-site required personnel			20%	50%	TBD		
Beirut (ESCWA)	On-site required personnel		50%		TBD *(phase II: 100%)*			
Santiago (ECLAC)	On-site required personnel				TBD *(four phases: 9.6%, 35%, 62%, 85%)*			
Addis Ababa (ECA)	On-site required personnel		18%	9%	25%	50-75%	100%	
Geneva (ECE)	On-site required personnel		0%	30%	>30%	TBD		

*A change in occupancy rate corresponds to a new phase in the respective Back to Office plan.

Table 3. Voluntary vs. mandatory return to office (within the limits of occupancy applicable to each phase as illustrated in Table 2), by Regional Commission

Location	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4-5
Bangkok (ESCAP)	Voluntary	Voluntary	To be defined	
Beirut (ESCWA)	Mandatory	Mandatory		
Santiago (ECLAC)	Mandatory*	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory
Addis Ababa (ECA)	Voluntary	Voluntary	Mandatory	Mandatory
Geneva (ECE)	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary	

*For essential personnel only, whose work has been identified as vital.

1.2. Triggers and indicators

The vast majority of respondents are going to employ a set of triggers/indicators to assess when to move from one phase to the next. On average (Figure 4), entities rely on local authorities' provisions, as well as on health data and trends, and on availability of local health services. Availability of testing and tracing is also widely reported. On the other hand, the availability of public services is reported by less than a half of respondents as a trigger for phase change. Data for Regional Commissions largely reflects that of HQs.

Figure 4. Triggers/indicators - average across phases (HQs)
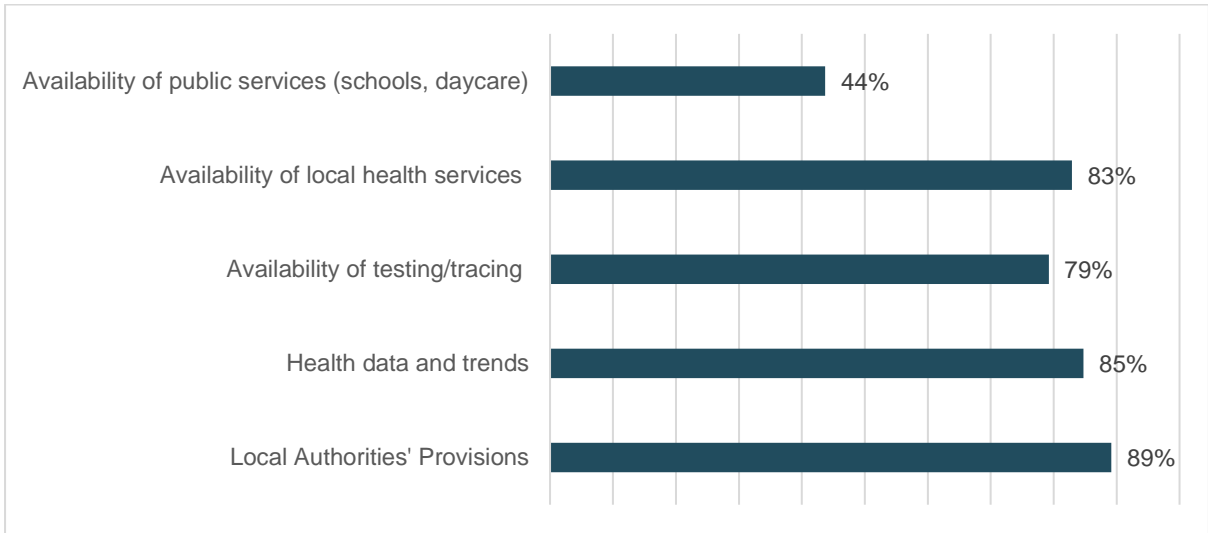
When considering the trends across phases (Figure 5), we note that, after the initial phase, several entities are less certain about which triggers/indicators they will apply to move to the next phase.

Figure 5. Triggers/indicators by phase (HQs)
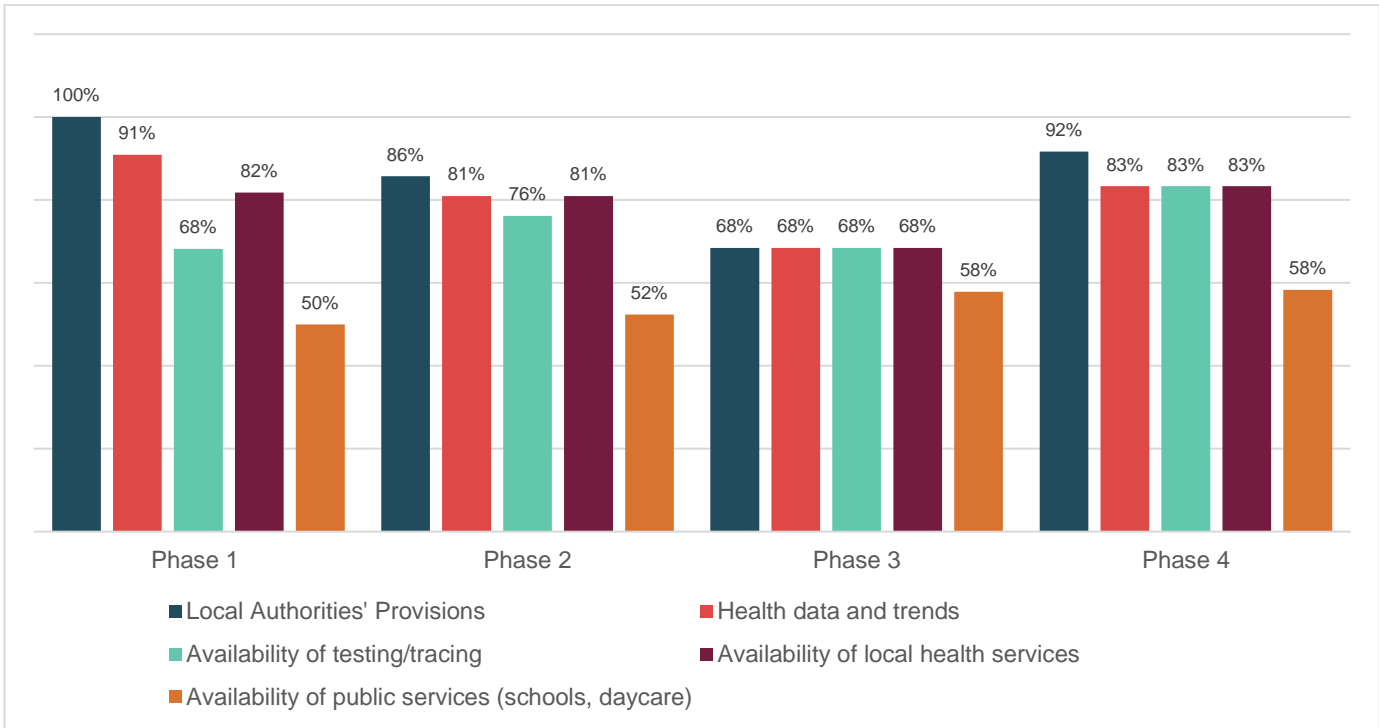
2   Meetings

2.1.   Type of meetings

The hosting of meetings and conferences in HQ locations (Figure 6 and 7) was completely discontinued or heavily reduced as a mitigating measure against the spread of COVID-19. This is particularly true for earlier phases, whereas in later phases a relaxing of restrictions is expected – first for UN personnel, and later for delegates and external participants. Organizational mandates play an important role in these decisions: entities where the hosting of inter-governmental meetings and conferences is one of the core functions are expecting to ease restrictions sooner than others. Figures 6 and 7 show this trend for headquarter locations.

With regard to the Regional Commissions, meetings for UN personnel will be allowed across the various phases, though with strict occupancy and distancing measures. Approaches to meetings with delegates and external stakeholders vary across the Regional Commissions. During Phase I, ESCAP UN Conference Centre (UNCC) has continued to conduct meetings in a hybrid set-up where meetings participants are connected virtually with the core team supporting the organization of the meeting onsite at the UNCC. ECA is planning to allow for meetings with delegates and external stakeholders in the last phase. ECLAC will allow them from the second phase onward. ESCWA is still reviewing the matter and a decision will be made once phase II is activated. ECE, following UNOG provisions, is ready to host meetings up the 300 people as of 8 June, with limits for other phases still to be determined.
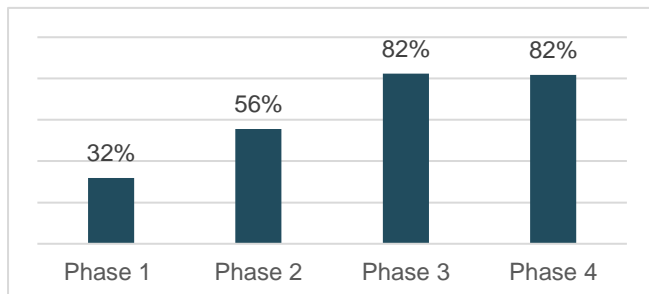
Figure 6. Meetings allowed - UN personnel   *Figure 7. Meetings allowed - delegates and ext. participants*
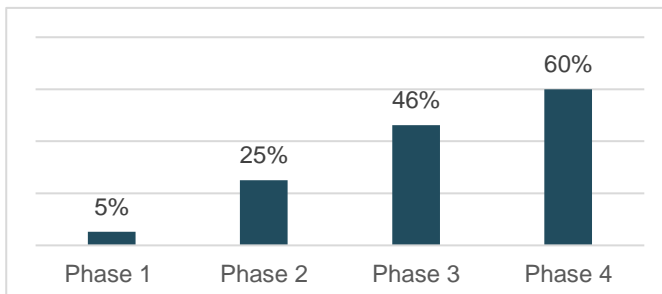
2.2.   Remote conferencing

Entities have been utilizing various remote conferencing services, including with interpretation, to allow for the continuation of meetings even in the presence of restrictions for in-person meetings. As illustrated in Figure 8, more than two thirds of respondents from both HQs and Regional Commissions have been planning to offer this service. However, provision of interpretation presents a challenge to some organizations given strict information security protocols. As phases progress and more in-person meetings resume, the amount of remote conferencing is expected to decrease, but will continue to be an important resource.

Figure 8. Availability of remote conferencing with interpretation (HQs and Regional Commissions)
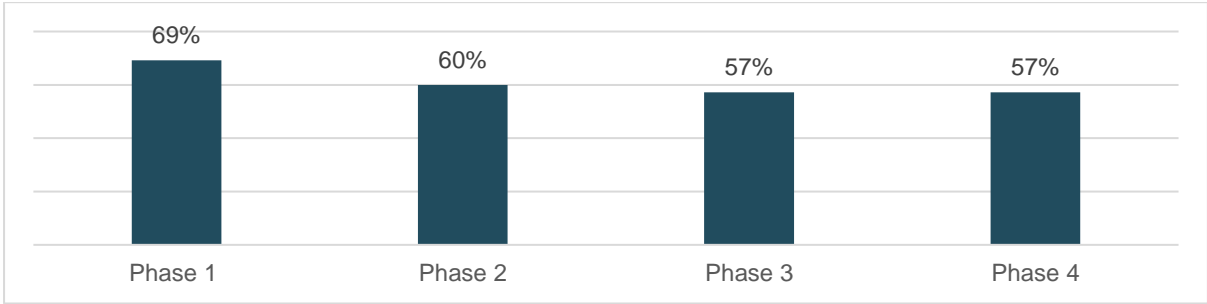
3   Safety measures

Respondents were asked to identify which types of measures they intend to utilize to ensure the safety of personnel returning to the office. Results are quite consistent across phases, as most measures are to be taken from the very beginning and will remain until the final phase.

As Figures 9 and 10 show, most entities have implemented or will implement changes in air circulation, signage (such as signs to explain correct personal hygiene or regulate the flow of people in buildings), increased cleaning and disinfection and limits to elevator occupation.

Less widespread measures include staggered working hours – which heavily depend on the overall plan developed by the entity – and temperature screening.

Figure 9. Safety measures (avg. across phases, HQs)
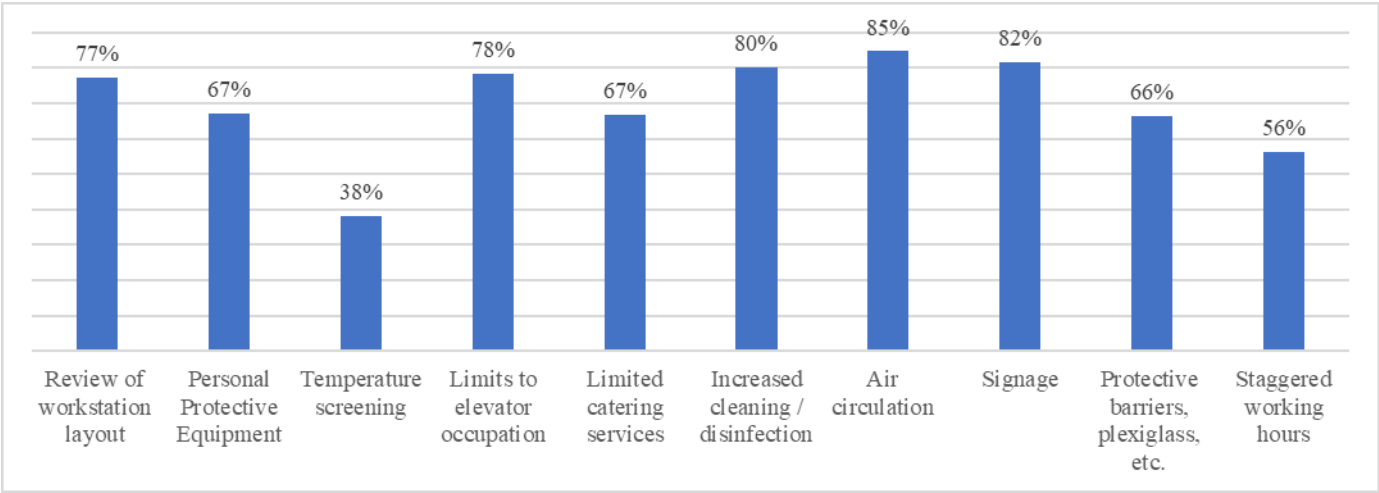
Measures in Regional Commissions are quite consistent with those taken at Headquarters, with the exception of temperature screening, which is much more widely used in Regional Commissions.

Figure 10. Safety measures (avg. across phases, Regional Commissions)
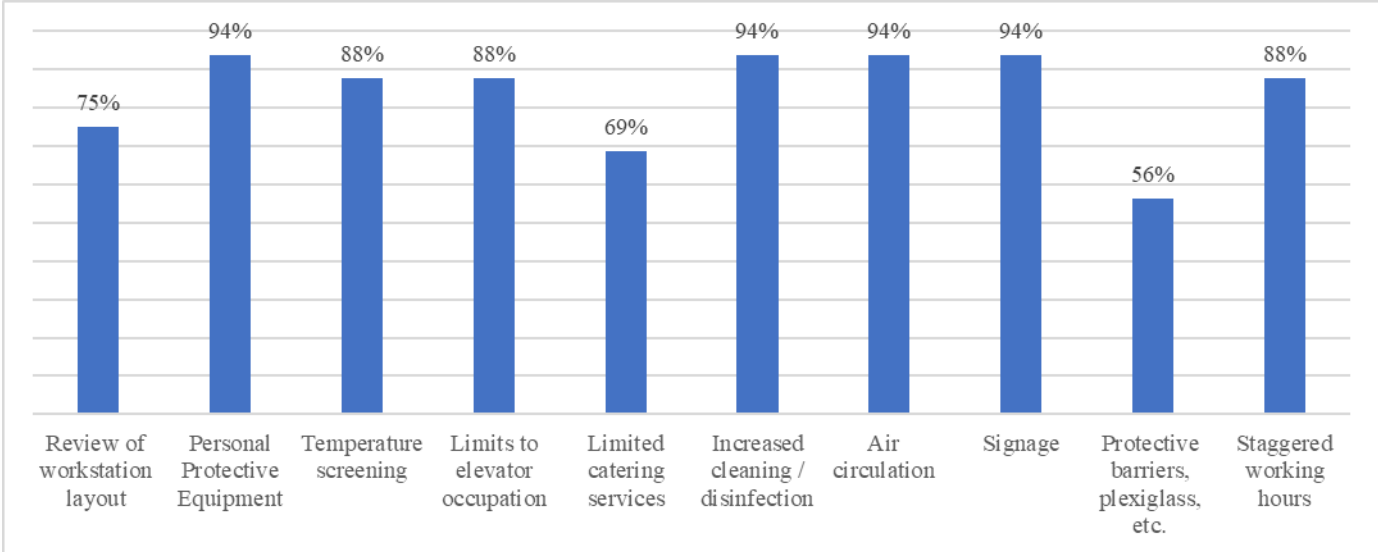
4 Conclusions

At the time when this questionnaire was administered, many entities were still considering the dates and parameters applicable to the various phases across which their Back to Office plans are organized. The HLCM secretariat plans to repeat this exercise periodically throughout the period during which entities will return to office, and will update the information presented in this note accordingly.

Annex 1: Questionnaire template

BACK TO OFFICE 2020 - BASIC FACTS AND FIGURES

Organization [   ]

1. Back to office schedule

* Complete each phase as relevant for your organisation. Indicators/triggers for each phase can be selected in table 2 below.

** Information on field offices can be provided on the basis of estimated averages for all field offices for each organization. We appreciate the considerable variety of different local contexts: the information requested aims to provide a high-level, estimated indication of UN System back to office trends.

Phase*	Applicability**	Start date	End date	Max daily occupancy rate at the premises (select % or # as appropriate)		Mandatory vs voluntary basis (select as appropriate)	Meetings allowed?			Provision for remote conferencing with interpretation
				%	Number		UN Personnel	Delegates	Max number of people	
1	HQ									
	Field offices									
2	HQ									
	Field offices									
3	HQ									
	Field offices									
4	HQ									
	Field offices									

2. Indicators / triggers

PHASE:	1	2	3	4
Requirements provided by local authorities				
Health data and trends				
Availability of testing/tracing				
Availability of local health services				
Availability of public services (schools, day-care)				
Other				

3. Social distancing measures:

PHASE:	1	2	3	4
Review of workstation layout				
Personal Protective Equipment				
Temperature screening				
Limits to elevator occupation				
Limited catering services				
Increased cleaning / disinfection				
Air circulation				
Signage				
Protective barriers, plexiglass, etc.				
Staggered working hours				
Other				

VI   List of Participants

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Vice-Chair: **Ms. Kelly Clements, Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR**
Secretary: **Mr. Remo Lalli, CEB Secretariat**
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UNSSC	**Mr. John Seav** Chief of Operations
	Ms. Chiara Piatti Policy and Corporate Coordination Officer

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