

17th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Virtual Meeting, 2 July 2020

Record



1. Attendance

This is listed as Annex 1 to the Record.

2. Opening Remarks

The Chair of the Standing Committee, Mr. Jeroen Panis, welcomed the participants. For this meeting there was no host country – due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Standing Committee was required to start using conference tools for its meetings sooner than expected. Under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic, the Advisory Committee acted promptly in developing guidelines to prevent possible transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from humans to bats. The task of the Standing Committee, on the other hand, referred to administrative and financial matters, and Mr. Panis informed the participants that the financial situation seemed to have improved, the details of which would be discussed at a later stage. In conclusion, Mr. Panis wished the participants a successful meeting.

EUROBATS Executive Secretary, Mr. Andreas Streit, also greeted the participants. The circumstances of the meeting were rather special. The 17th Meeting of the Standing Committee (StC17) was planned to take place in Belgium, but, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not possible. Mr. Streit was glad to see all the members of the Standing Committee in good health.

3. Adoption of the Agenda

The StC-Chair asked whether there were any comments on the Agenda. Mr. Oliver Schall reminded the participants that the 16th Meeting of the Standing Committee (StC16) took place on June 6, 2019, and that there was an informal follow-up in the form of a video-conference on February 7, 2020. Though it was not expected that a formal record would be produced for the follow-up meeting, there was supposed to be a record for StC16 and its adoption was missing in the current Agenda. In case the StC16 record was not to be discussed at this meeting, Mr. Schall would bring up the issues related to the record under Agenda point 7 “Any Other Business”. Mr. Streit explained that the draft record from StC16 had been

circulated among the participants for comments. The Secretariat received very little feedback on it, so it was considered as adopted.

There being no further remarks on the Agenda, it was also adopted.

4. Adoption of the Rules of Procedure

Mr. Panis asked whether there were any comments to the Rules of Procedure of the Standing Committee. Mr. Schall pointed out Rule 12, referring to the meetings of the Standing Committee, which stated that the Standing Committee should have deliberations normally every year. He suggested that Rule 12 should be amended to include the possibility that on average at least every second meeting should be a virtual one. Mr. Streit responded that it was up to the Committee to decide if it wanted to change the Rules of Procedure, but that formally there was no need for it. Deliberations included equally a physical meeting as well as anything else. Mr. Panis believed this point did not need further regulation in the Rules of Procedure. Mr. Schall explained that having it in writing would make this rule more binding, however, if other members did not see the need to change the Rules, he would not insist on it. There being no further remarks, the Rules of Procedure were adopted.

5. Secretariat Report:

Mr. Streit referred to Doc.StC17.8 and highlighted only some points from the written report. As of April 1, 2020, one staff member left the Secretariat. It was Ms. Kate Horn, who worked as a Secretary at EUROBATS. She had taken up a new post outside of the UN. Since Ms. Horn's departure, the Secretariat was organized as it was the case during Ms. Horn's maternity leave, and, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee, the post occupancy of the Scientific Officer was increased to 80 percent. This increase would be fully covered by the savings made in the Secretary's budget line. Mr. Streit expected that even more savings would be generated, as the increase in the P2 post occupancy would not consume all the savings made by the Secretary's post being vacant. Mr. Streit kindly invited the Standing Committee to endorse this arrangement, which it did. The Executive Secretary also specified that there would be no new recruitment for the post of the Secretary since the entire workload during the time of Ms. Horn's maternity leave was also managed with the same manpower and organisation as it was currently the case.

Referring to the Agreement membership (Recruitment of new Parties), Mr. Streit explained that Bosnia and Herzegovina still had to submit a new instrument of accession to the Depository and, hopefully, the process of accession of Bosnia

and Herzegovina was soon to be concluded. There were no other indications that countries would join the Agreement, however, Mr. Streit hoped that this would change once the situation had normalised.

Regarding outreach activities, Mr. Streit referred the participants to the written report. The Secretariat was still shipping a lot of publications, for which there was a high demand. Further publications were also in the pipeline, and at least one of them should be finalised by the end of 2020, in spite of the fact that most likely the Advisory Committee could not hold its meeting within this year.

Eurobats Projects Initiative (EPI) was under the supervision of the Scientific Officer. In 2020 only one project was sponsored, since the funds were limited, and other project proposals were not given a high ranking.

Since March 2020, the Secretariat was working from home, with virtual staff meetings being organised regularly. At the time, the UN campus in Bonn was slowly reopening, with physical presence of not more than 40 percent of all staff members at a time. These were the instructions received from UNEP to which the whole CMS family felt bound. However, other UN agencies in Bonn allowed up to 60 percent of all staff members being present at the premises at the same time. EUROBATS, being a small secretariat, had obtained the permission that on one day in a week all its staff members could be present at the same time. The plan after the vacation season was to have at least two staff members at a time present in the office (the other two working from home), with one day on which all staff members would come to the office together.

In conclusion, Mr. Streit informed the Standing Committee that the Secretariat had organised a successful online meeting, which was initiated by the Advisory Committee, but attended by many external virologists and epidemiologists. The trigger for the meeting were the hastily produced guidelines by IUCN. The EUROBATS community felt an urgent need to come up with its own guidelines on how to deal with the situation and to develop precautionary measures to protect bats from an eventual transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from humans to bats. The guidelines were a successful work that the Advisory Committee could achieve. They were well received by the NGOs and those working in the fields. The Secretariat had also offered to organise virtual meetings for all Intersessional Working Groups if needed. Referring to the postponing of the 25th Meeting of the Advisory Committee (AC25), Mr. Streit explained that he was not in the position to say if it would take place still this year, but his personal feeling was that this would be very unlikely.

Considering the recruitment of new Parties, the Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee, Mr. François Lamarque, asked whether there was a possibility for Spain to sign the Agreement. Mr. Streit answered that he had no recent news in this regard, but that he hoped the activities that had started would continue. There was a high pressure from the Spanish NGOs on their Government, and hopefully, this would bring some results. One positive signal in this direction was that a government representative from Spain was present at the previous meeting of the Advisory Committee.

Mr. Lamarque also asked whether there would be any savings due to the Coronavirus situation and the postponement of AC25, and whether these would be reflected in the next year's budget. Mr. Streit explained that any eventual savings would not be spent on anything else. If the funds would not be needed for travel or organisation of the AC meeting, they would go into the Trust Fund. Though the Trust Fund had started to recover, it still needed more savings. Additionally, the current budget still foresaw withdrawals from the reserve. Thus, whatever savings should be made, they would be used to stop or reduce withdrawals from the Trust Fund.

6. Administrative Matters:

a) Report on income and expenditure in the financial year 2019 as well as Trust Fund status as of 31 December 2019

The Executive Secretary referred to Doc.StC17.4 and explained that, on the side of contributions, the situation was good since most of the Parties were paying their contributions in a timely manner. The only exception was North Macedonia which had arrears for many years, however, last year it started paying the arrears in portions. These were not eliminated but were decreasing. All in all the amount of contributions in arrears was still small and had no impact on the budget.

Moving to Annex 2 of Doc.StC17.4, Mr. Streit explained that, in view of the serious financial situation as discussed during StC16 in Sofia, the Secretariat had put an austerity plan in place to generate as much savings as possible. The overall shortfall on staff costs was smaller than expected, amounting to a bit more than 5,500 EUR, which could easily be covered by savings in other budget lines. Reducing all the expenditure to the minimum, the Secretariat had managed to generate savings of about 19,000 EUR, which was also reflected in the status of the Trust Fund.

Mr. Lamarque asked about the unpaid pledges for Italy and how it was possible that Italy still had 1,800 EUR of unpaid pledges when the amount on the invoice was a completely different one.

Mr. Streit explained that, with the implementation of the new UN scale of contributions, the invoice for Italy was 1,800 EUR higher than before. Unfortunately, the amount agreed for in Italy's budget was still based on the old invoice. Italy already informed that this would be corrected with the following payment, and that the unpaid pledges would be covered. Mr Vittorio De Cristofaro confirmed it.

Mr. Panis then concluded the discussion on Annex 2 by summarising that the overall surplus was about 19,000 EUR with regard to the budget adopted at the 8th Session of the Meeting of the Parties (MoP8). However, this budget still included about 38,000 EUR withdrawal from the Trust Fund. Mr. Streit commented that the withdrawal of 38,000 EUR did not take place to the full amount. As Doc.StC17.4 showed, the total amount of savings was 21,394 EUR, so that only the difference needed to be withdrawn from the Trust Fund. This amount corresponded to what was actually available for the withdrawal. Already at StC16 in Sofia, Mr. Streit informed the participants that the planned withdrawal of 38,000 EUR was not possible because of the Trust Fund status. However, owing to the savings made, the little remaining amount in the Trust Fund was sufficient to cover the withdrawal. Thus, even the mandatory operational reserve of 86,000 EUR did not need to be used and only the freely available portion of the Trust Fund was withdrawn.

Mr. Schall asked for the explanation why the expenditure for the P2 and P4 posts in Annex 2 was higher than the budget had foreseen.

Mr. Streit referred to the explanation provided during StC16, saying that the costs for the professional positions were fully computed in USD. Due to the very bad exchange rate between USD and Euro, it was obvious already at the beginning of 2019 that a short fall would occur. The budget planning was done correctly, however, it was based on a more favourable exchange rate. In the meantime, the exchange rate had again slowly started to improve. The Chair of the Standing Committee commented that the Committee had been confronted with this situation since three or four years, and that this issue needed to be readdressed at the next session of the Meeting of the Parties.

Mr. Streit then proceeded to comment on Doc.StC17.6 and Doc.StC17.7, representing the Trust Fund status reports from 2019 and 2018 respectively. The Trust Fund status report from 2018 was included in the documents for the sake of

a better comparison. The report from 2019 showed a very positive development in the overall balance. There was a surplus in the Trust Fund that by itself would be sufficient to cover what was originally planned to be withdrawn from the Trust Fund, but what would not be needed, also due to the additional voluntary contributions, which would be discussed later. The Administrative and Finance Management Unit had checked the documents thoroughly and had confirmed the correctness of the figures.

The StC-Chair asked for the confirmation that funds were indeed withdrawn from the Trust Fund in 2019. The Executive Secretary confirmed this. He explained, however, that the withdrawal was much smaller than originally foreseen. Mr. Panis commented that the withdrawal still amounted to about 17,000 EUR. He was astonished that, in spite of the withdrawal, the Trust Fund status still showed a surplus of about 39,000 USD. Mr. Streit explained that this was partly due to a very positive investment revenue of over 26,500 USD in 2019. In 2018 the investment revenue was significantly lower, namely ca. 3,000 USD. This was an income that was not in the hands of the Secretariat. The UN Treasury made investments with the trust fund, and, depending on their success, it generated more or less revenue. Answering to the question of the StC-Chair, Mr. Streit explained that the report represented the status as it was on 31.12.2018. It was not going to change, except that only one payment still needed to be computed, but that would not make a significant difference in the status of the reserve.

Mr. Panis concluded the discussion on this topic by saying that the crisis seemed to have been overcome. Mr. Streit added that the Secretariat continued to be extremely cautious, as the goal was to generate more reserve to provide the necessary budget security to the Agreement.

b) Projection of the financial situation in 2020 including voluntary contributions

The Executive Secretary referred to Doc.StC17.5, dealing with the voluntary contributions received in 2019 and a projection of expected voluntary contributions for 2020. Normally, voluntary contributions belonged to a separate Trust Fund and were used mainly for projects and similar activities. After a formal call was made for additional contributions by a letter from the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee, EUROBATS received additional voluntary contributions to cover the feared gap in the regular budget. In 2019 the voluntary contributions were still earmarked for either the meeting costs, or for EPI projects, or for the production of publications, but in 2020 they were intended to cover the regular costs. The big amount received from Switzerland late in 2019 was also earmarked

to produce information material for IBN as well as EUROBATS publication series, however, the donor agreed that the funds could be spent in 2020.

The StC-Chair demanded that it should be reflected in the record how grateful the Agreement was to the countries that made voluntary contributions. To Germany, Luxembourg, and Switzerland for their regular voluntary contributions, to Croatia and Malta for their contributions for the organisation of the AC meeting, and especially to Monaco, whose voluntary contribution basically saved the Agreement.

Ms. Radostina Galitionova suggested that a letter should be sent to those countries to thank them officially. This suggestion was accepted, and the Executive Secretary was asked to prepare a letter that was to be signed by the Chair and the Vice-Chair. Mr. Streit explained that a letter on behalf of the Secretariat had already been sent to those countries, but that it would be good if there would be an additional formal letter. He also reminded the members of the Standing Committee that additional 30,000 EUR were to be received from Monaco in the following two years as well, so that the total amount received would be 90,000 EUR. This was an extraordinary generosity to help the Agreement.

To complete the picture for 2020, Mr. Streit explained that a generous voluntary contribution had been received from Germany, which this time exceptionally was to be used to cover some of the regular costs, e.g. IT costs, and would thus help the regular budget. The same was the case with the additional voluntary contribution from Luxembourg, which was to be used to cover a portion of the P2 costs. The new contribution from Croatia would be used for publications. Since the contribution from Malta and Croatia in 2019 were received for the organisation of AC25, the Secretariat needed to ask the donors to extend the deadline, so that the contributions could still be used until 2021.

c) Staffing situation in the Secretariat

It was agreed that the staffing situation had already been covered under Agenda item 5 "Secretariat Report".

Mr. Schall asked, in relation to the staffing situation and the budgetary issues, if there was any chance that EUROBATS could get support from the EU to co-finance one of the posts. Though the EU was not a Party to the Agreement, it also supported AEWA in a similar way, and it had already cooperated with EUROBATS on the joint action plan for bats. Mr. Streit reminded the participants that the Committee had already requested him to explore this possibility. As this would represent institutional funding and not project funding, he had received a firm

negative response from the EU. In the case of AEWA, the Agreement was receiving funding for large-scale projects. Should that become the case for EUROBATS as well, the Secretariat could try to apply for this funding. However, EUROBATS projects were too small-scale and were already being funded by the voluntary contributions from the EUROBATS Parties.

d) Secretariat Work Plan

Introducing the Secretariat work plan, Mr. Streit explained that it had been adjusted, however, that it still bore some question marks as it was not possible to predict how the second part of the year would look like. The work plan covered the time span up to May/June 2021. Until then, the Secretariat hoped that it would again be possible to travel to meetings. For the time being, the staff members were not authorised to travel and had no information when this would change. The Secretariat tried to reflect the situation as good as possible, however, the members should keep in mind that, depending on the developments, the work plan could change.

The Chair noticed that the work plan contained a few significant changes in comparison to the previous one. For example, under activity 1 the General Services Staff time required shrunk from five to two weeks. With regard to human resources, the time required got reduced by a half. The Chair asked the Executive Secretary to comment on it. Mr. Streit explained that the biggest change resulted from the fact that there was currently one General Services Staff member less in the team. The other changes came from the reorganization of the tasks within the Secretariat, where the Scientific Officer, with a higher post occupancy, had taken over the tasks of projects administration and proof reading of publications. The work plan also reflected the situation with telecommuting, in which there was a very significant increase in written communication. On the one hand, the work plan needed to be amended to reflect the situation which was comparable to the one when Ms. Horn was on maternity leave. On the other hand, changes needed to be made due to the current situation caused by the pandemic. One example for such changes was the time required from the P4-officer for participating at meetings.

The Chair referred to Activity 2 Action 1 in the work plan and asked for the clarification why the General Services Staff time needed for the completion of this task got so much shorter, when it involved a routine task that was not reallocated to a different staff member. EUROBATS administrative assistants clarified that a bigger portion of these tasks were currently being completed by the Administrative and Finance Management Unit and that the EUROBATS staff members had to

shift their time to where it was more needed. Additionally, since the staff members had become well acquainted with UMOJA, performing those tasks did not take as much time as it did before.

Referring to the activity 7, task 1, in the work plan, Mr. Schall reminded the members that the following year would not only mark the 30th anniversary of the Agreement but also the 25th anniversary of the International Bat Night. The Secretariat planned to produce information material for the 30th anniversary of the Agreement, and Mr. Schall suggested that the two anniversaries should be combined, also in order to save funds. Mr. Streit answered that all the material that would be produced could be used for both occasions. What exactly would be produced still depended on the financial situation in the year to come, but, owing to the Swiss voluntary contribution, the Secretariat had already started producing information material that could also be used later.

Mr. Schall also asked which publications were being prepared, and to what extent they had been finalised. He was particularly interested at which stage the publication on bats, insulation, and lining materials was. Mr. Streit explained that he was referring exactly to this particular publication when he mentioned that he hoped it would be finalised soon. It was difficult to say, when exactly that would be. It was usually within the margins of the Advisory Committee meeting that such publications were brought forward. Unfortunately, this year's AC meeting had to be postponed. However, the Executive Secretary was optimistic that the increased capacity of the Scientific Officer would help carry that work forward. There being no further comments, the work plan was approved.

Action point 1: *The Secretariat to prepare a letter to be signed by the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee, thanking all the donor countries for their voluntary contributions.*

7. **Upcoming International Events and Developments in Nature Conservation Relevant for Bats and the Agreement**

Mr. Schall mentioned that, during the previous StC meeting, he informed the participants there was a resolution proposal concerned with the protection of the night under preparation for the 13th CMS Conference of the Parties. In this context, there was an upcoming international event that was of interest also for EUROBATS. Namely, during the 13th CMS Conference of the Parties in India, it was decided that one of the future World Migratory Bird Days should be dedicated to the protection of the night. It was not clear when exactly this would be, but

EUROBATS could liaise on this topic with CMS and AEWA to see for when it was foreseen and to use it also for the purposes of bat conservation. Mr. Streit confirmed that he would get in touch with the relevant Secretariats to check how EUROBATS could contribute to this event.

Mr. Streit further added that the only meeting he was aware was supposed to take place still in 2020 was the Standing Committee Meeting of the Bern Convention in Strasbourg. It was still too early to predict whether it would indeed take place and in which form. For 2021, another International Berlin Bat Meeting was planned (IBBM), which had meanwhile been very well established. It was supposed to take place in 2020, but it was postponed to spring 2021. This would be a big and important meeting on the international level and a special day was to be dedicated to the Coronavirus. EUROBATS planned to contribute to this meeting.

Ms. Marie Nedinge reminded the participants of the European Bat Research Symposium that was supposed to take place this year in Finland but was postponed for summer 2021.

Dr. Volodymyr Domashlinets mentioned two CBD meetings that were also of relevance for EUROBATS as well since these were dealing with post 2020 targets. One of the meetings was scheduled for November 2020, and the other one was the CBD Conference of the Parties planned in May 2021.

Action point 2: *The Secretariat to liaise with CMS and AEWA on World Migratory Bird Day with the topic of the protection of the night.*

8. **Any Other Business**

Ms. Marie Nedinge informed the participants that BatLife Sweden had been founded. The NGO applied for a membership in BatLife Europe, and since its included both specialists and laymen, it had good chances to be accepted.

Mr. Schall informed about a joint project between his Directorate and the Charité in Berlin, most known nowadays for its Robert Koch Institute. This project was to bring together the Charité experts for viruses and the experts for bats from the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN), with the purpose of examining the excrements of the German bat populations, i.e. middle European bat populations, to prove that there was no SARS-CoV-2 in these bats. The project should start very soon. Though its scope included only Germany, with Bavaria, Hessen, and Schleswig Holstein participating in it, it was of importance for other European countries as well. The fact that Ms. Ruth Petermann, the Vice-Chair of

the EUROBATS Advisory Committee, was in charge of this project on the side of BfN suggested how important it was.

Ms. Radostina Galitionova informed that, during a CITES committee meeting, it was discussed that the European Commission should prepare a guidance for legal and illegal trade of wildlife in relation to COVID-19. The guidelines would be of interest for EUROBATS as well since they would also include measures for marking wildlife bats. Concerning the discussion on bats in relation to SARS-CoV-2, Mr. Streit wanted to emphasise that bats were never confirmed as the source of SARS-CoV-2 – the source was still unknown, and that no single bat worldwide had been found carrying COVID-19. It was important to repeat this fact to fight the false information which had been spread by the media since months.

The Chair asked whether there were any other points to be added under Agenda item “Any Other Business”.

Mr. Streit reminded the delegates that, after this meeting, the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee would no longer be performing these functions. The Chair was assigned to a new task within his Agency, and was no longer in charge of EUROBATS issues, and the Vice-Chair was about to retire. Mr. Streit expressed his and EUROBATS sincere gratitude for the many years of excellent cooperation, as well as his hope that the Chair and the Vice-Chair would keep in touch with the Secretariat and the EUROBATS community. Mr. Panis explained that, his expertise being ecosystem services and climate change, he would in the future follow the work of IPBES. His Agency had not yet appointed a new person to oversee EUROBATS issues. Mr. Panis said that he very much enjoyed working in EUROBATS for its good ambience and good spirits, and he thanked all the StC-members as well as all the other Party representatives for the good cooperation. Mr. Lamarque explained that his speciality were mammals and that he was interested to discover bats as they covered all the cross-cutting issues we were facing: migration, insect decline, light pollution. He joined EUROBATS a couple of years ago, and it was a real pleasure to work in it and to discover this topic.

9. Date and Venue of the 18th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Mr. Streit explained that he should liaise with the successors of the Chair and the Vice-Chair, once they were appointed, to discuss when, where, and in which form the next meeting should be organised. As soon as there was any news in this regard, he would inform the StC-members. The meeting could be expected to take place by the end of May and the beginning of June 2021, after the AC-meeting, to allow the Standing Committee to see the results of the Advisory Committee work

and to give their feedback on the goals indicated. Mr. Panis reminded the Executive Secretary of the remark given by Mr. Schall concerning reducing the number of face-to-face meetings. In that sense, it might be advisable to have an online meeting in the following year and keep the face-to-face option for the year when the joint meeting of the Advisory and the Standing Committees was to take place.

10. Close of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15:58.

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