

Security Council Open VTC, 15 May 2020

*Ensuring transparency, efficiency and effectiveness  
in the work of the Security Council*

**Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) statement**

Submitted by Ambassador Jürg Lauber, Permanent Representative of Switzerland  
on behalf of the Group

Mr. President,

1. I am pleased to submit this statement on behalf of members of the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency group (ACT) Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Gabon, Ghana, Hungary, Ireland, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Maldives, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Portugal, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Sweden, Uruguay, and Switzerland. One of the core objectives of the ACT Group is to encourage better working methods in United Nations organs, in particular the Security Council. We thank today's briefers for their statements and commend the efforts deployed by Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in its capacity as Chair of of the Informal Working Group on Documentation and other Procedural Questions (IWG).
2. The present context illustrates the existential importance of working methods that meet high standard of transparency, efficiency and effectiveness. After the COVID-19 pandemic rendered physical meetings impossible, adapting the working methods to the new situation has been essential for the Security Council in order to ensure business continuity. Doing so as quickly as possible is also a key responsibility of the Council towards the wider UN membership, on behalf of which the Security Council discharges its mandate. The current crisis thus demonstrates the urgent need for continuous progress on working methods, not only with respect to agreeing on new improvements but also with respect to the implementation of what has been agreed upon.
3. Against this backdrop, the ACT Group would like to underline important progress as well as to address shortcomings, first in the context of the current situation and second in the broader context of the working methods of the Security Council. We would also like to make several concrete proposals that can enhance transparency, efficiency and effectiveness in the work of the Security Council.

Mr. President,

4. The ACT group acknowledges the unprecedented nature of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Secretary General of the United Nations stated in his 9 April briefing to the Security Council, "the world faces the gravest test since the founding of the [United Nations]", and the Security Council is not immune to this situation. While the lack of leadership by the Security Council in addressing the pandemic and its impact on international peace and security is of great concern to our group, we appreciate the agility that the Council has shown regarding its working methods. Albeit with a slow start by Council members, the Council has demonstrated flexibility and innovation by agreeing on adaptations that have allowed it to continue to consider the items on its agenda as per its reporting cycle, to address topics and situations that require the Council's attention, to vote on resolutions renewing mandates or addressing other matters and to adopt PRST's. We congratulate in particular the successive presidencies of the Security Council since the outbreak of the pandemic for their efforts.
5. The ACT group also acknowledges the progress made in terms of transparency and inclusivity since the Security Council started to carry out its work virtually and after a worrying start in the "new" mode. We particularly welcome the fact that all meetings taking place in lieu of briefings in the open chamber are now being webcast in their entirety, as well as the circulation by the Presidency of written statements by briefers and Council members and non-members, as applicable, as an official Council document. The solution found to allow the wider membership to participate in writing in open VTC's happening in lieu of open debates is another pragmatic and positive innovation. We also welcome that the release of press elements has become the norm rather than the exception since the beginning of the pandemic.

6. However, more efforts are necessary for the Council to meet the standards of efficiency, as well as of accountability and inclusion towards the wider UN membership, and for the Council to be effective. All this is to be expected, notwithstanding the unprecedented and extraordinary nature of the current situation. To begin with, the absence of any meetings or formal action by the Council for more than two weeks after it was rendered incapable to meet physically is not acceptable in view of the importance of its mandate, when in fact it should show leadership in addressing the crisis. In the future, we expect the Security Council to be fully prepared to switch instantly to a “virtual mode” and to otherwise effectively adapt to any other situation where physical meetings would again not be possible. We call on all Council’s members to show flexibility, agility and open-mindedness with regard to necessary adjustments in the procedural framework of the Council in this respect, with the overall objective to maintain a state of readiness to meet and make decisions in these unique situations.
7. Furthermore, in spite of the welcome agreement on a written procedure to adopt resolutions, we are concerned that the Council is not in a position to ensure swift reaction to developments pertaining to the maintenance of international peace and security. The ACT group encourages the Council to agree on an updated procedure that allows the Council to vote virtually and in real time. In addition, the ACT group sees no reason why all virtual meetings taking place as per the Council’s mandate are not included in the Council’s formal Programme of Work and in the UN Journal. The Council meetings taking place currently as VTC’s should be deemed as official, formal meetings of the Council. In the same manner, the Council’s subsidiary bodies need to resume their work by either using written procedures or holding VTC meetings as official subsidiary body’s meetings. We are concerned about the effects that this situation may have on the reporting instruments of the Council as per the Charter, in particular the annual report of the Security Council. In spite of the afore-mentioned progress with regards to inclusion, the Council should take up discussions regarding the interpretation of virtual meetings in all UN official languages. We are also concerned by the fact that civil society representatives, in particular women, have had little opportunity so far to brief the Council since the beginning of the practice of holding virtual meetings. We call on the Council not to let the pandemic reverse important progress made over the last years in this respect.
8. Looking ahead, we also see a great merit in considering the present crisis as an opportunity to draw lessons-learned and to make some recent adaptations permanent, provided that they would reinforce the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of the Security Council also under normal circumstances. Among these, the Security Council could consider to continue the practice of the written circulation to all permanent missions of all statements made by briefers and Council members during open meetings. We would also welcome discussions regarding the possibility of adding the current format of “open debates” (characterized by the submission of written statements by non-Council members) to the Council’s toolbox, including in view of enhancing the Council’s efficiency. No matter their exact modalities, we believe that working methods of open debates should allow member and non-member States of the Council to participate on an equal footing and recall that the *raison d’être* of open debates is to give the opportunity to the Membership to inform Security Council deliberations (as today’s open debate demonstrates) rather than to merely accompany the adoption of pre-defined Council’s products. Given these priorities, the ACT Group encourages the separation of the debate from work on and adoption of a related outcome. In addition, we continue to note the need for more open debates on country situations, a tool which the Council has used effectively in the past. We also encourage the Council to expand the possibilities of direct participation of briefers and member States who are unable to travel to New-York, as the crisis has demonstrated further the feasibility of carrying out virtual exchanges between interested parties, including at the highest political level. The full potential of technology can also be harnessed in a variety of other ways, for instance by exploring the possibility of conducting virtual Security Council visits to the field as a complementary instrument to existing and established physical visits. The ACT group stands ready to contribute to the process of identifying lessons-learned of the crisis and to support the work of the IWG in this process.

Mr. President,

9. Beyond the current situation, we are convinced of the importance to maintain our attention towards constantly improving the working methods of the Security Council, to implement good practices in a consistent manner and not to slide back from previous decisions and commitments. We particularly welcome in this regard the adoption in December 2019 under Kuwait’s leadership as the Chair of the IWG of eight Notes by the President on various issues of importance for the enhancement of the working methods of the Council. We must also acknowledge the progress made in important aspects of the transparency and inclusivity of the Council’s work, such as the holding of wrap-up sessions. These have been organized by eleven

of the last twelve Council's presidencies over the last twelve months and have overall had an increasing interactive character.

10. The ACT group calls on the Security Council to show consistency in the implementation of Note 507 and of the eight Notes most recently adopted. Among them, the Council has now the opportunity to abide by its commitment regarding the annual report of the Security Council that must be adopted in the spring and possibly before the end of this month. We would like to recall the importance of this process as a vehicle for transparency and accountability regarding Council's work and look forward to the opportunity to exchange on its content in the General Assembly as shortly as possible. Closer interaction between the Security Council and the General Assembly is also necessary in situations where the Security Council drifts away from the larger membership – and thus the world – including when it is not able to take decisions due to the use of the veto or the threat of using it. The ACT group continues to encourage all States, members and non-members of the Security Council alike, to join the 121 signatories of the ACT Code of Conduct and to implement it.
11. Furthermore, the ACT group calls on the Council to build on the success achieved in the context of the IWG in 2019 and continue its work on important improvements that have not yet been agreed upon. First, responsibilities of members in Security Council matters must be more equally shared so as to enhance the participation of all members, including elected members and in particular when it comes to drafting Council's products. Second, fairness and clarity of sanctions processes are important determinants for the implementation and impact of UN sanctions and in this regard the Ombudsperson mechanism is a key element for the preservation of the integrity, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of the Council's sanctions system. We therefore once again call on the Security Council to take all necessary measures to further strengthen the independence and impartiality of the Office of the Ombudsperson and to eventually expand the mandate of the Ombudsperson to other sanctions regimes.

Mr. President,

12. We welcome the exemplary manner in which today's discussion is conducted in relation to principles of accountability, transparency and efficiency and in spite of the extraordinary situation. As the pandemic acutely demonstrates, the working methods of the Security Council are of interest to the whole UN membership and the way to guarantee its readiness and agility in the face of any crisis. Improving them is our collective responsibility. As recent progress as well as shortcomings show, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness are mutually reinforcing principles that must continue to guide improvements in the working methods of the Security Council. The ACT group is committed to do its part and to actively contribute and support any initiative towards this end.

Thank you, Mr. President.