# Survey on experiences with the SAICM Virtual Working Group process
October 2020 - February 2021

## Summary of responses from stakeholders

The present report provides a summary of the responses to an online survey conducted among SAICM stakeholders on stakeholders' experience of the virtual working group process held between October 2020 and February 2021. The findings will inform the design of possible future virtual work until the time when face-to-face meetings are feasible.

The IP Co-chairs, Bureau and Secretariat thank all stakeholders who contributed to the survey, sharing their experiences and making valuable suggestions.

## 1. Background

With restrictions due to COVID-19 and the postponement of the 4th intersessional process meeting (IP4) and the 5th International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM5), the co-chairs of the intersessional process proposed to establish a number of Virtual Working Groups (VWGs) to support the work of the intersessional process.

The virtual working group process was held between October 2020 and February 2021 to inform to the deliberations at IP4 scheduled for March 2021. However, in January 2021, the Bureau decided to further postpone IP4 and ICCM5 due to the continued pandemic. The work of the VWGs progressed according to the initially agreed schedule.

The VWGs were not intended to replace formal face-to-face deliberations at IP4 and/or negotiations that will take place at ICCM5 but rather were intended to further build understanding and prepare delegates for these negotiations. The purpose of the virtual working group process was to develop proposals for tangible outcomes including notes identifying gaps, compromise text proposals, and new or alternate text, as appropriate. The mandates of the VWGs were developed and posted on the SAICM website. Guidance on the modalities for the virtual working groups was also prepared.[1]

The VWGs were co-facilitated by government representatives from all UN regions. Co-facilitators prepared summaries of VWG proceedings and outcomes so far. The outcomes of the VWGs shall be considered at IP4, and/or during further virtual work prior to IP4.

The VWGs were established to work on a few specific and concrete issues that needed further development as follows:
(i) VWG1: Targets, indicators and milestones (5 virtual meetings, 4 rounds of electronic feedback);
(ii) VWG2: Governance and mechanisms to support implementation (8 virtual meetings, 5 rounds of electronic feedback);
(iii) VWG3: Issues of concern (4 virtual meetings, 3 rounds of electronic feedback); and
(iv) VWG4: Financial considerations (4 virtual meetings + 1 small subgroup virtual meeting, 3 rounds of electronic feedback).

In total, 22 virtual meetings were held, and 15 rounds of electronic feedback was undertaken. On average, 200 participants registered for each of the four Virtual Working Groups and over 100 participants registered for each of the virtual meetings. Additionally, stakeholders were invited to provide written inputs at various points during the virtual process. The virtual meetings were conducted on the Webex meeting platform and were also recorded and made available via YouTube.[2]

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[1] All information about the VWGs can be found on the SAICM website.
[2] The SAICM Secretariat YouTube channel with all recordings can be found here.

**Online Survey:** In order to assess experiences with the Virtual Working Group process and gather suggestions for possible future virtual work, an online survey was launched and circulated to all SAICM stakeholders on 16 June 2021 with a deadline of 16 July 2021. The survey was made available in the six official UN languages. It included a total of 40 questions, combining multiple choice questions as well as open questions for inputs. The survey can be found here; responses to each question can be found here.

## 2. Respondents and participation

A total of 116 responses were received, with governments / stakeholders from 66 countries completing the survey (Q1) [3] and representing all regions (Q2):

| Please indicate your country (Q1) | Please indicate your region (Q2) |
|---|---|
|  |  |
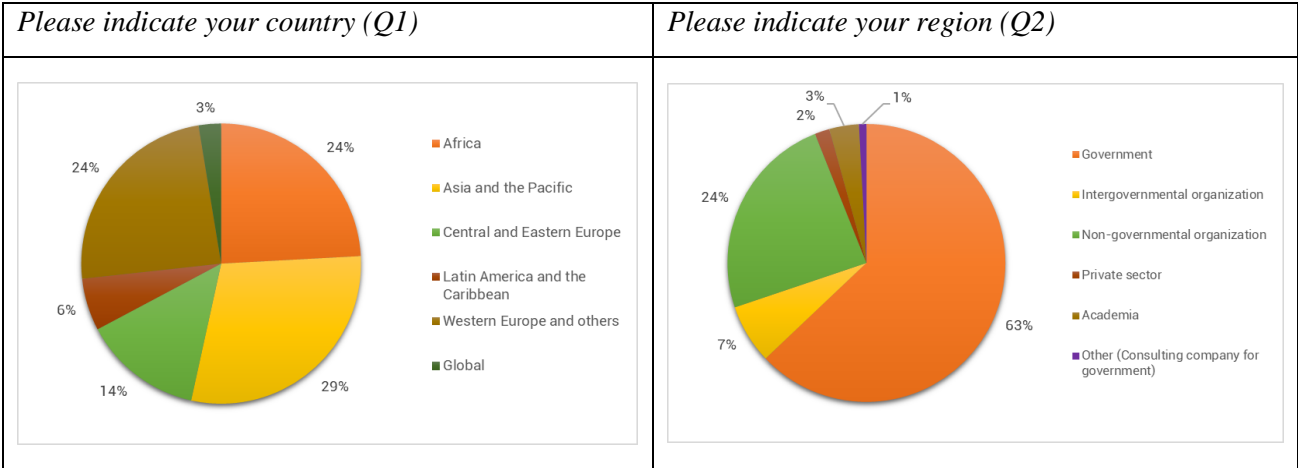
Respondents submitted the survey as representatives of a stakeholder group (53%), as individuals (35%), as representatives of a network (10%), and as representatives of a coalition (2%) (Q5).

78% of respondents were registered participants in the VWG process, while 22% had not participated (Q6). Those who had not registered mentioned a variety of reasons (Q7), including [4]:
- They did not have any information about the virtual process;
- They did not have the information in time;
- They did not have an internet connection, or Webex was not supported in their country;
- They lacked time, human resources, and/or coordination in their organisations;
- They were not clear about the role of the VWGs.

When asked **which virtual meetings they registered for** (Q8), respondents indicated individual meetings as presented in the graphic below:



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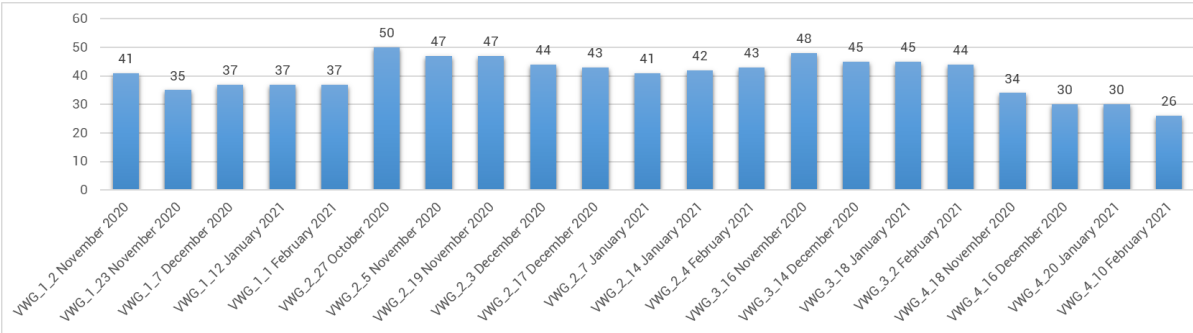
[3] The letter "Q" refers to "question" in the survey; the number refers to the respective questions number in the survey.
[4] Reasons are listed decreasing frequency.

44% of respondents had submitted written comments during the VWG process; 56% had not (Q9). Among those who submitted written comments, 57% did so on behalf of an individual government / stakeholder, and 43% did so on behalf of a group of governments or other stakeholders (Q10).

Respondents were also asked **how many times they provided written comments** during the VWG process, and a majority (83%) did so more than 3 times (Q11):

*Q11: How often did you provide comments?*
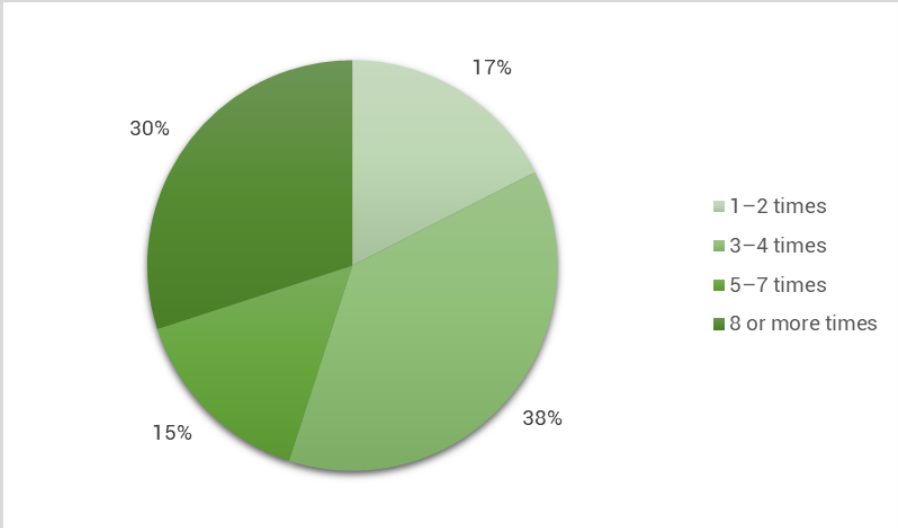


*Note*: Question 12 ("Did you participate in any of the online meetings?") was a question that was meant to lead respondents who had participated in virtual meetings, and those who had not participated in any virtual meeting, to the respective, specific follow-up questions.

Question 13 ("If you did not participate in the online meeting, please specify the reason(s)") was only answered by one respondent (i.e. conflicting schedule) not yield any additional information.

## 3. Review of Stakeholders Experience

The survey included a number of questions to assess respondents' experience with the meeting platform, the website, documents, as well as timing of meetings and scheduling of the virtual process.

Most participants (86%) found accessing the **virtual meeting platform** (Webex) worked well (Q14). However, 46% of participants encountered technical problems during online meetings (54% did not).

Respondents who encountered difficulties indicated that these were generally related to technical issues, such as Internet connectivity, sound quality, video quality, and problems with the chat or the hand-raising functions (Q16). Reasons for problems encountered also included lack of equipment, time zone differences, conflicting meetings, and others (Q17).

| Kind of problem(s) encountered by participants (Q16) | Main Reasons for problem(s) encountered by participants (Q17) |
|---|---|
|  |  |
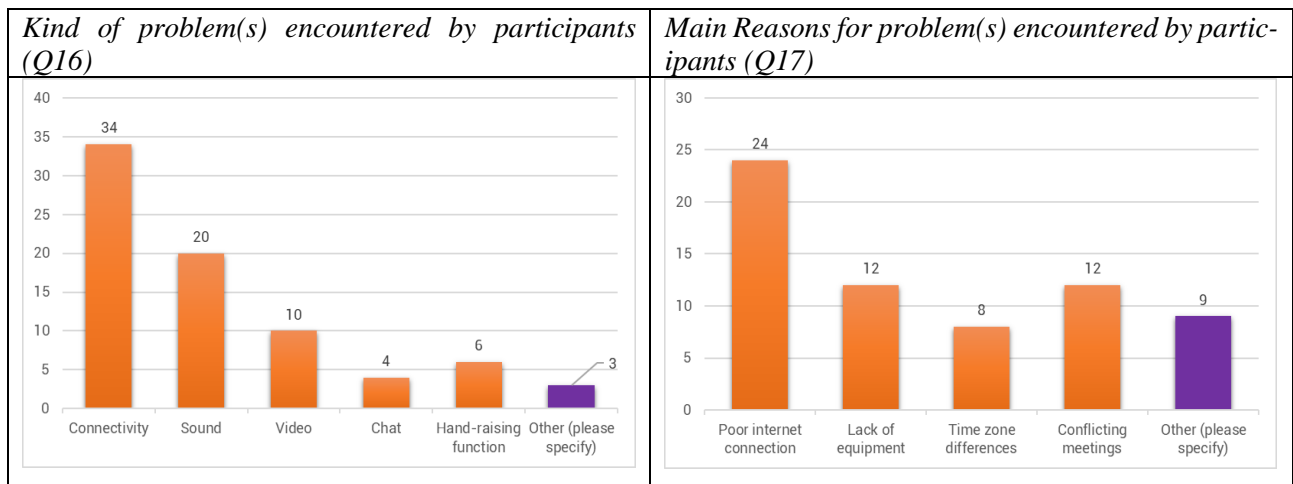
Among respondents, 69% indicated they had used the **chat function** during meetings (Q 18).

Nearly all respondents (93%) indicated that they found all necessary information and documentation on the **SAICM website** (Q19); 87% reported that they were able to access the calendar of meetings (Q20). 84% of respondents said that the **timing of the meetings** was acceptable to them in relation to their time zone (Q21), and 89% felt that the VWG meetings had been announced in a timely manner (Q22).

61% of respondents indicated that the **documents for the VWG meetings** were made available in a timely manner (Q23), while 39% felt that this as not the case.

Responses to the question about the **need for time in order to consult documentation and be sufficiently prepared** for the VWG meetings (Q24) were varied. In sum, over 60% of respondents expressed that they needed 2 weeks or more to sufficiently prepare for VWG meetings (Q24):

*Q11: How much time did you need to consult the documentation and be sufficiently prepared for the virtual working group meetings?*
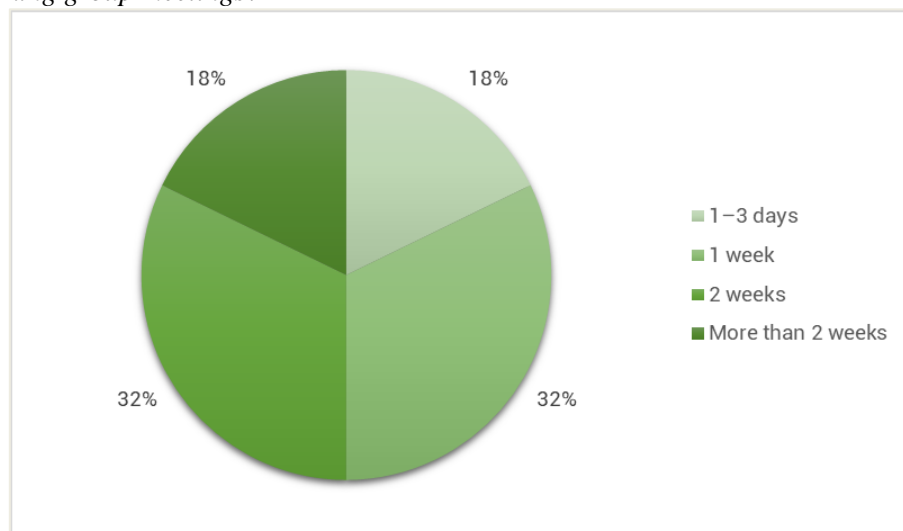
Similarly, responses to the question about **necessary time between VWGs in order to digest meetings summaries and prepare for subsequent sessions** (Q25), were varied:

*Q25: How much time between the virtual working group meetings was needed for you to digest the meeting summaries and prepare for subsequent sessions?*
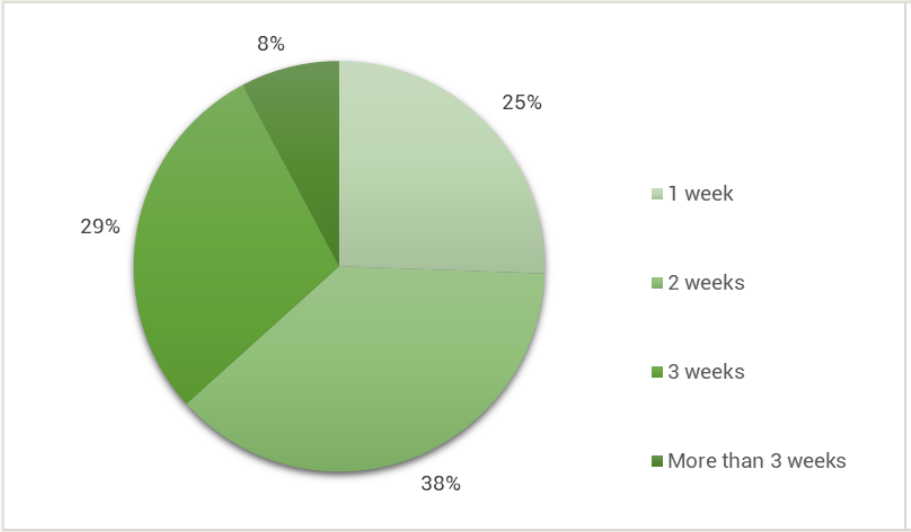


These results indicate that two thirds of respondents (67%) need at least three weeks to digest meeting summaries and prepare for subsequent sessions.

69% of participants did find the **overall schedule of the four virtual working group meetings** "not really manageable" (Q26), and 2 % said it was "not at all" manageable. Less than one third of respondents (29%) indicated that the schedule was manageable for them.

*Q26: Was the overall schedule of the four virtual working group meetings manageable for you?*
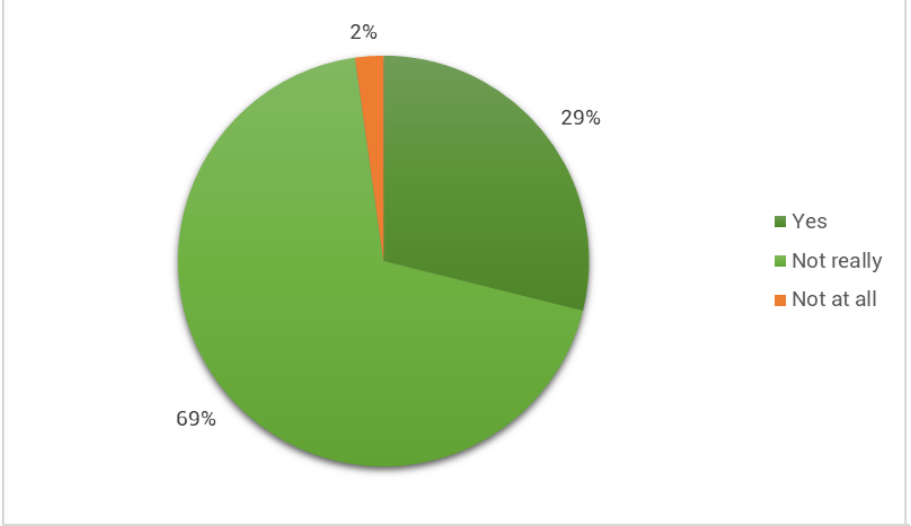


*Note*: It can be assumed that the total of 22 meetings during a time period of less than five months, and including the holiday break in December / January, plus requests for electronic feedback was experienced as too much for a majority of respondents. As outlined above, the dense schedule was created at a time when the IP Co-chairs and Bureau expected IP4 to be held in March 2021.

## 4. Suggestions for possible future virtual work

The survey included a range of questions relating to suggested improvements in possible future virtual work. These touch upon the meeting platform, scheduling and timing of virtual meetings, the need for support, and commenting on meeting documents, among others. The last two questions were open for respondents' comments on further increasing engagement in preparation for IP4, and on priority areas that require further discussion.

**Meeting platforms and functionalities:** Respondents indicated their preferences regarding the functionalities of the meeting platform (Q27) as summarized below. In addition, several respondents mentioned that communication via email was preferred, others mentioned small group meetings and breakout groups.

*Q27: Which of the following functionalities are useful for you? (respondents were able to click multiple answers)*
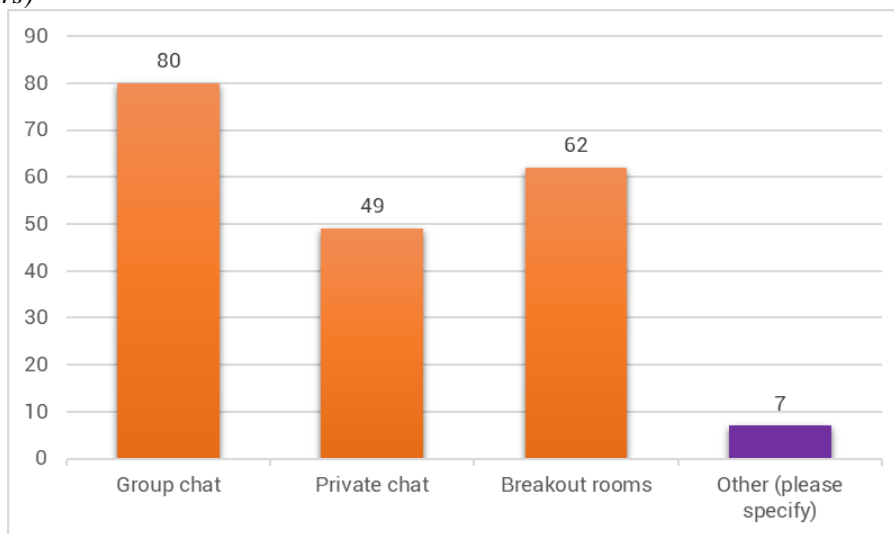


When asked for other technologies / meeting platforms that they would recommend (Q28), many suggested to use Zoom, others MS Teams, or GoToMeeting.

*Q28: Have you used other technologies/meeting platforms that you think would be better suited to the virtual working group meetings? (respondents were able to click multiple answers)*
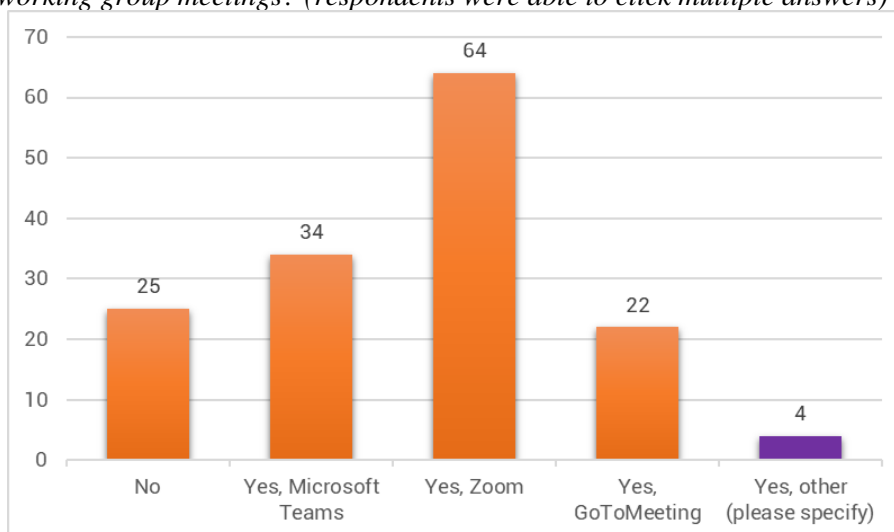


**Scheduling and timing:** Respondents were divided on the question if **the same meetings should be held several times**, in smaller groups, in different time zones (Q29): 53% answered yes, 45% no.

When asked for **preferred starting times for future meetings**, respondents indicated a range of times (Q30).

A majority of respondents (83%) indicated that tools such as online **simultaneous interpretation** would be useful for enhancing inclusiveness and participation (Q31).

In terms of the **need for support** to participate effectively in an online process, about one third (29%) of respondents said they did need support (Q33)[5]. Responses to Q34 indicated the kind of support required:
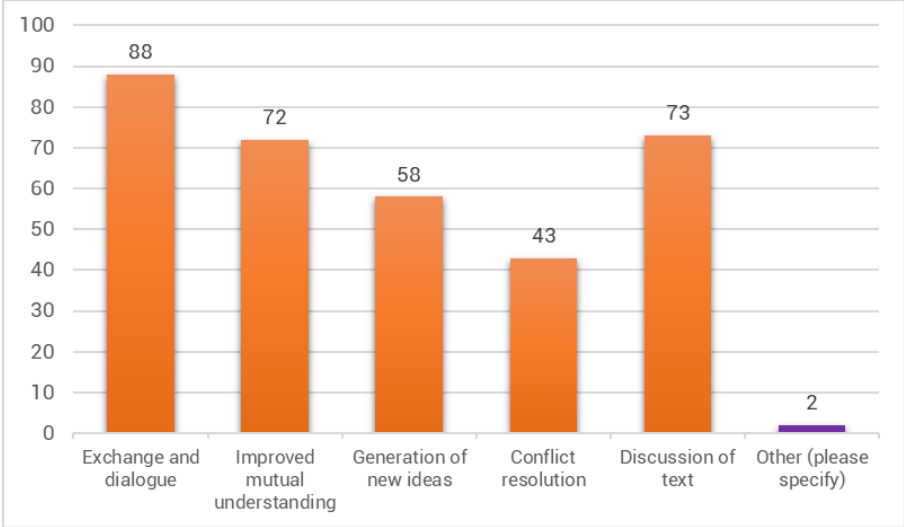
*Q34: Please indicate the support that you would need.*
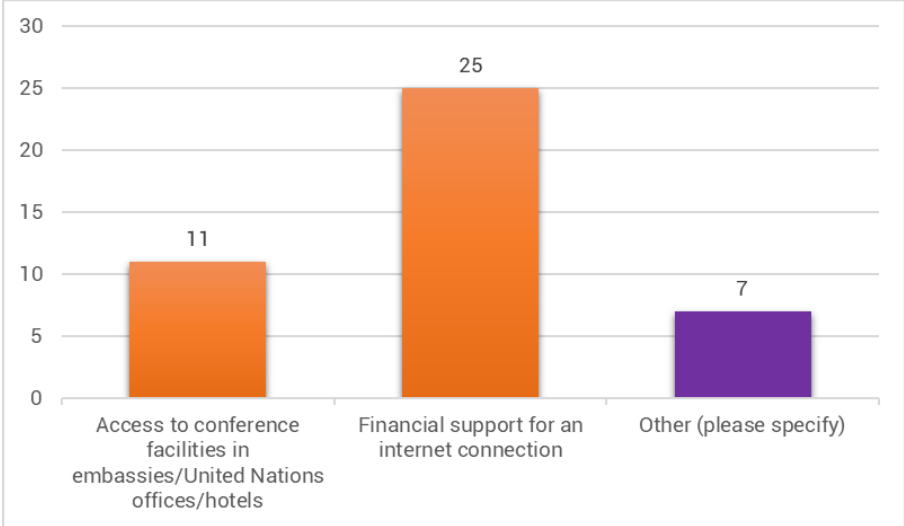


Additional comments included the need for hardware equipment like a laptop, and IT experts to help "manoeuvre low bandwidth problems".

Respondents indicated "which of the following would be **helpful for future virtual work**" (Q35):

*Q35: Which of the following would be helpful for future virtual work?*



A variety of options was chosen: respondents tended to indicate "exchange and dialogue", "discussion of text" and "improved mutual understanding", while "generation of new ideas" was not mentioned that often and "conflict resolution" was most rarely indicated.

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[5] Note: As the sample of respondents might be biased towards those who have good internet access, the actual percentage among all SAICM stakeholders may be higher.

A majority of respondents felt "that stakeholders who are unable to participate actively in meetings should be allowed to **provide written submissions** PRIOR to the meeting" (89% - Q36) as well as "AFTER the meeting" (87% - Q37).

88% of respondents felt that an opportunity for **regional dialogue** would be helpful for their region (Q32). A majority of respondents thought that **regional briefings or meetings** would be valuable to advance the intersessional process, in addition to a second round of virtual working group meetings, until face-to-face meetings are feasible (Q38).

*Q38: In addition to a second round of virtual working group meetings, which of the following options could be implemented to advance the intersessional process until face-to-face meetings are again feasible?*
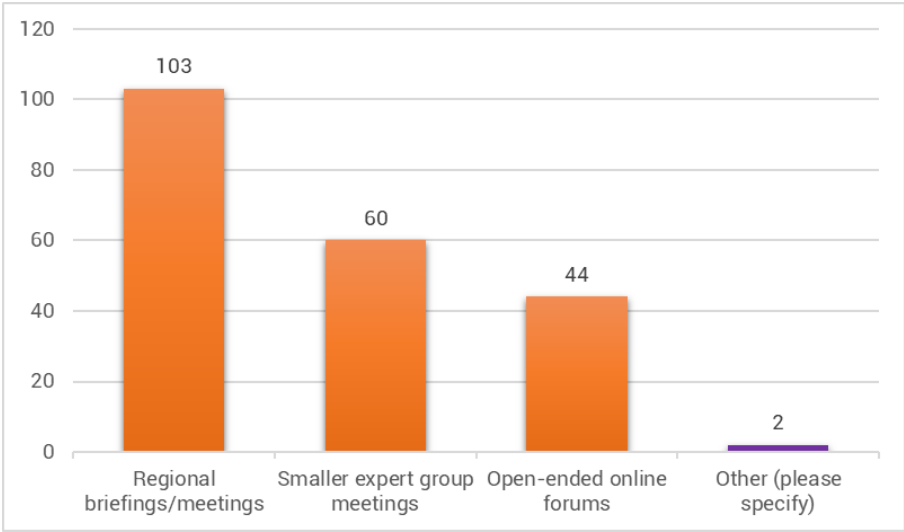


### Further increasing engagement in the preparations for IP4 (Q39)

Many respondents provided comments when asked for "any other suggestions for further increasing engagement in the preparations for IP4"; over 80 individual answers were submitted. These are summarized and clustered below; priority has been given to comments that were made more than once, and/or were particularly concrete and specific.

A variety of **meeting formats**, in addition to the VWG format conducted, were suggested:
- **Regional meetings** were suggested by many respondents, and for a range of purposes, including:
  - to provide briefings (such as presentations of VWG process results so far), overviews, introductions and updates, including in different UN languages;
  - to enable consultation and coordination at regional level; and
  - to "pull back together after COVID-19 and build on points of congruence".
- **Smaller groups** focusing on specific issues were suggested. This may include policy and technical expert groups to address specific issues (e.g. reviewing suggested targets & indicators), and consultations among smaller groups of stakeholders in-between meetings. Small group meetings would need to be well integrated in the overall process, e.g. by holding larger meetings with broad participation to ensure transparency.
- **Technical briefings**, **(short) webinars and online presentations** providing updates on progress made to stakeholders who have not participated in respective parts of the process, and/or providing overviews on substantive issues.
- **Sectoral meetings** such as health, labour, environment, or agriculture.
- **Preparation and training workshops** for stakeholders new to the SAICM (virtual) process.

A range of activities and formats were suggested to increase **outreach and participation**:

- Organize outreach workshops to provide overview and introduction about SAICM, the Beyond 2020 process, and engagement opportunities.
- Encourage more participation from industry, academia, and international organisations, and conduct targeted outreach beyond the "chemicals community", particularly to increase participation from industry, health ministries, labour, and other sectors.
- Increase direct engagement with industry, including through the guidance document (under development) and other activities that also encourage their participation in the overall SAICM process.
- Increase cooperation and coordination with relevant stakeholders (BRS Secretariat, Minamata Secretariat, GEF Secretariat, IOMC Participating Organisations) to enhance participation and synergies of work.
- Follow up with IP3 participants and invite them to join the virtual process.
- Add points to meeting agendas that relate to multi-sectoral participation and the role of each sector.

Many suggestions related to **working with documents** to complement virtual meetings and enhance participation:

- Written submissions should be used further as they are "essential for understanding other stakeholders' views"; they should complement but not replace discussions.
- Documents should be provided in 6 UN languages.
- Written notes before virtual meetings and informal summaries prepared by co-facilitators after meetings would be helpful and support mutual understanding.
- Stakeholders should be invited to submit comments on the VWG reports prepared by co-facilitators, including suggestions on remaining issues; these could be a starting point for next steps.
- A summary document should be prepared, providing an overview of discussions during the first round of VWGs and reviewing progress and achievements made to date; including reference to agreed points and differentiated views. A matrix format should be considered to facilitate quick understanding of remaining issues, necessary decision-making, etc.
- All documents should be carefully numbered in order to avoid mix-ups.
- Documents should be shared well in advance and in between meetings (preparation times of 2 weeks and 4 weeks were mentioned).
- A questionnaire could be sent out with each meeting summary to obtain feedback and comments.
- All stakeholders should be alerted when new and additional documents, submissions, etc. become available.

With regard to the **scheduling of virtual meetings**, respondents made the following suggestions:

- Provide calendar alerts for those who registered as reminders in advance of meetings.
- Schedule meetings with more time in between (lower frequency).
- Schedule sufficient time to prepare for meetings and for written comments to be submitted and digested prior to the meetings.
- Consideration of time zone differences is important; meetings should be scheduled at different times to share the load of inconvenient timing more broadly / equally (rotating meeting times).
- Conduct the same meetings several times for different time zones.
- Smaller (regional) working groups would allow for more flexible and convenient scheduling – however, there is a need to ensure information flow between groups.
- Do not overload meetings with extensive agendas; don't rush discussions; rather have more but shorter, focused meetings.

With regard **to support for participation**, respondents mentioned:

- **Technical assistance** for dealing with the virtual platform(s), including a help desk to be available 1-3 days in advance of meetings, and online trainings and advance briefings for stakeholders to learn how to participate effectively in online meetings.
- **Financial assistance** for airtime and other necessary funds to enable participation, especially by developing countries' representatives and NGOs.

Respondents also commented on ways and methods of **conducting virtual meetings:**

- Co-facilitators to actively encourage contributions from all stakeholder groups, regions and sub-regions, as well as sectors in order to enhance broad and equitable participation, by extending the time and adding further rounds of questions and explanations; be prepared to suspend meetings due to lack of (balanced) participation; be neutral towards all different participants; and be sure to start all meetings on time.
- Avoid negotiation as it leads to "least common denominator" agreements in virtual settings.
- Conduct meetings in ways that allow new ideas to be included; this also helps to engage stakeholders who are new to the SAICM process.
- Provide simultaneous interpretation in UN languages.
- Participants to clarify whether they are speaking as a representative of a stakeholder group or organisation, or in their individual capacity.
- Create WhatsApp groups for participants registered to virtual meetings to allow more exchanges parallel to the video conference call.
- Regardless of the choice of meeting platform, future meetings may benefit from using additional tools, such as polling tools (like Mentimeter, Slido, etc) and/or virtual boards (like Miro, Mural, etc). to increase engagement and enhance interaction.

**Other comments** on how to enhance participation included:

- Invite representatives of health, labour and agriculture ministries to Bureau meetings.
- Provide capacity development regarding all aspects of SMCW and the SAICM process.
- Face-to-face meetings are needed to make progress.
- Provide vaccinations for all participants and conduct face-to-face meetings to allow negotiation.
- Share more information about the SAICM Secretariat's work.
- Support civil society organisations and their work in countries and rural areas.

## Priority areas that require further discussion (Q40)

Many respondents shared suggestions regarding "priority areas that require further discussion in order for progress to be made in 2021"; over 100 individual comments were submitted.

**All previous VWG issues** were mentioned as priority areas for further discussion:

- 35 respondents mentioned **targets, indicators and milestones** (or parts thereof) as priority areas for further discussion. This would include developing a clear indicator framework, linking targets to indicators that allow to track progress effectively under the new framework / instrument; and increasing joined-up discussion of reporting / accountability, targets and indicators given the inter-linked nature of these topics. Respondents also mentioned that there was a need for fuller / broader representation of all stakeholders in these discussions.
- 27 respondents said that **financial considerations** needed to be prioritized during further discussions. Issues mentioned included: necessary support for developing countries, international cooperation, capacity development and technical assistance, as well as innovative financing and Green Finance; finance standards/taxonomies and how to build on the integrated approach. It was also mentioned that the issues of private sector involvement in capacity development should be discussed in a broader group. Some respondents mentioned that these issues were not suitable for virtual discussions and should better be postponed to negotiations at face-to-face meetings.
- **Issues of concern** (and emerging policy issues) were mentioned by 21 respondents as priority areas for further discussion. Issues mentioned included chemicals and wastewater; endocrine disruption; mixtures; and chemicals in products. Respondents also felt it was important to discuss the definition of issues of concern, and how they were to be identified. In-depth discussions were suggested to be held in multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral groups in order to review proposed issues of concern.
- 20 respondents felt that **governance and mechanisms to support implementation** (or aspects of them) were important priority areas for further discussion. This should include the shape, form, structure of the new framework / instrument; address governance at international, regional and national levels; include the role of focal points; address reporting and review; and develop rules of

procedure. Respondents also mentioned that some of the governance-related issues were rather difficult to discuss in virtual form and may need to be postponed to be addressed in face-to-face meetings.

**Considering new topics:** While some respondents expressed that no new VWGs should be created, rather the work with the previous groups should continue, others noted that the focus should now be on topics that have not been discussed in the four previous VWGs. Some respondents suggested to prioritize topics where not much progress had been made in the VWGs, while others felt that some of those same issues were not suitable for being addressed in a virtual setting.

In addition, respondents suggested **further topics for discussion** – some that are cross-cutting to previous VWG topics and could be considered in the established VWGs, others are additional topics[6]:
- Science Policy Interface, although timing vis-à-vis the UNEA 5.2 process would need to be considered; include the CH/Japan proposal on reporting and review.
- Overall structure / regime of the new framework / instrument.
- Legal obligations, stricter implementation; enforcement.
- Cooperative action under the new framework, with clear objectives and the necessary budget; developed countries sharing information.
- Multi-sectoral engagement, such as agriculture, agroecology; and stakeholder engagement, including private sector involvement.
- Global perspective on waste management, including hospital waste.
- High-level commitment to SMCW.
- Enhancing sustainable chemistry.
- Cost of inaction.
- Risk reduction.
- Gender equality, including a Gender Action Plan and a Gender Focal Point to be created under SAICM.
- Making SAICM more human rights oriented.
- Financing NGO engagement.
- How to make best use of the work under SAICM so far.
- Exchange of country level experiences with implementing SMCW.
- Gaps and challenges regarding national and local policy making, implementation, management.
- Regional policy, regional plans and programmes.
- Response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Chemical safety.

In terms of **designing a future virtual process**, respondents made the following suggestions:
- Continue the virtual process at a slower pace.
- Consider how to reactivate engagement of SAICM stakeholders in the post-pandemic period.
- Compile a single document including all four previous VWGs to provide an overview of the current ambition and gaps; this should be a comprehensive review of the whole text, including Rules of Procedure, in order to ensure coherence and consistency.
- Clarify the role and nature of co-facilitators' summaries of VWGs; this would need to be discussed, including creating possibilities for stakeholders to comment on summaries.
- IOMC organisations and stakeholders to compile summaries of progress made on Emerging Policy Issues (EPIs).

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[6] NB: Topics are listed in decreasing frequency of being mentioned.