



KEEP
A SAFE
DISTANCE



Chapter 2

Unprecedented times:
adapting to the COVID-19
pandemic

UN Geneva and the COVID-19 response

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland, the Swiss authorities took a number of measures to prevent the spread and limit the impact of the virus. The measures included an initial nationwide lockdown of nearly three months, from 16 March to 8 June.

At UN Geneva, the Director-General quickly established a COVID-19 Response Team. The measures implemented by the host country were strictly adhered to; meetings at UN Geneva were suspended, and staff telecommuted, with the exception of a limited number of staff critical to maintaining the functioning of the Palais des Nations.

UN Geneva embraced flexibility, innovation and technology to rapidly adapt to these unprecedented circumstances and ensure business continuity while supporting the health and well-being of staff.

Here are some examples of how we did this:

Telecommuting

Existing culture change efforts at UN Geneva, including through [#NewWork](#), more flexible working practices, and innovation via networks such as [Young UN](#), paid off during the lockdown.

Staff switched from working at the Palais des Nations to working from their homes and UN Geneva remained “open” for business, continuing to provide support to our clients and for intergovernmental processes. The transition was made smoother by the earlier wide adoption of part-time telecommuting and related training for managers and staff, investment in and migration to cloud-based IT tools, and the commitment and efforts of our staff. Increased internal communication meant that staff received regular and up-to-date information.

It was, nonetheless, a challenging period for UN Geneva and its staff. Workloads in many teams increased, new ways of operating and solutions had to be found, there was a greater burden on managers to support and lead their teams through an uncertain and difficult time, and many staff members juggled their work with other commitments such as home schooling and family care. The need to support staff through health and well-being services also increased.

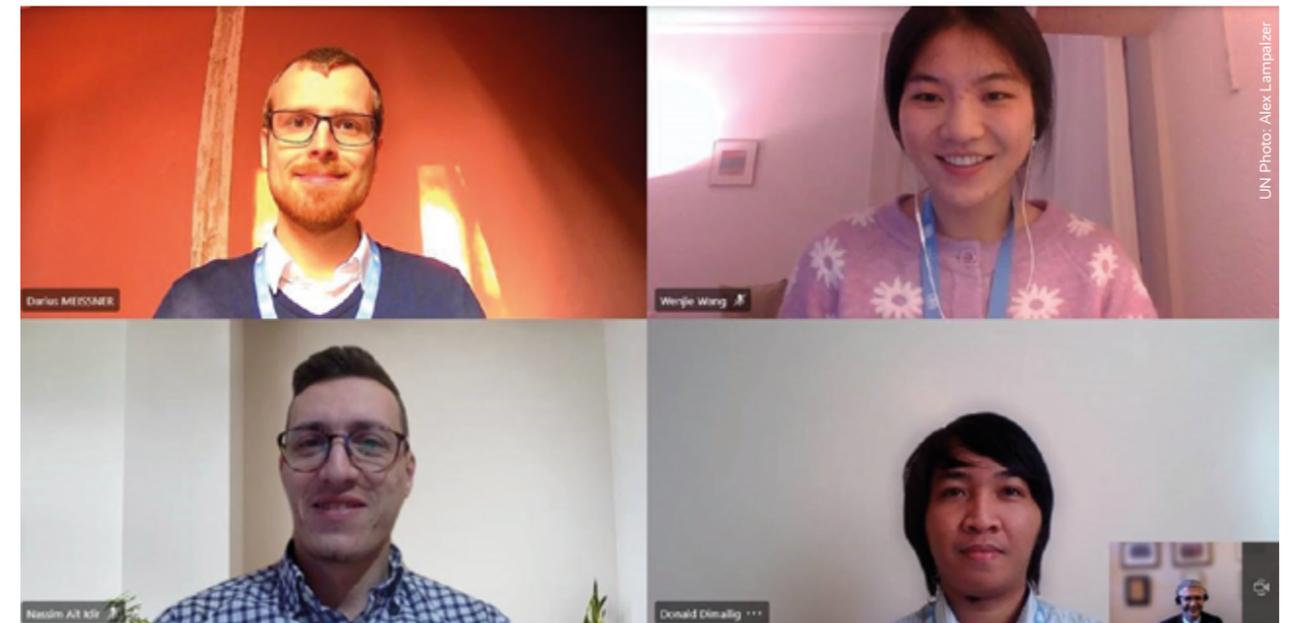
The lockdown and switch to working from home also had an impact on the implementation of the UN’s internship programme. There are considerable benefits to an in-person internship, particularly as regards networking opportunities, face-to-face mentoring, and social

integration in the workplace. However, partially and even fully remote internships during the lockdown still provided valuable opportunities for interns to learn and develop, as well as to contribute their ideas and skills to the work of the UN, for example by conducting research, helping to organize virtual events, preparing background papers, drafting speeches, and more.



A UN Geneva staff member works from home.

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs interns take part in a virtual meeting.



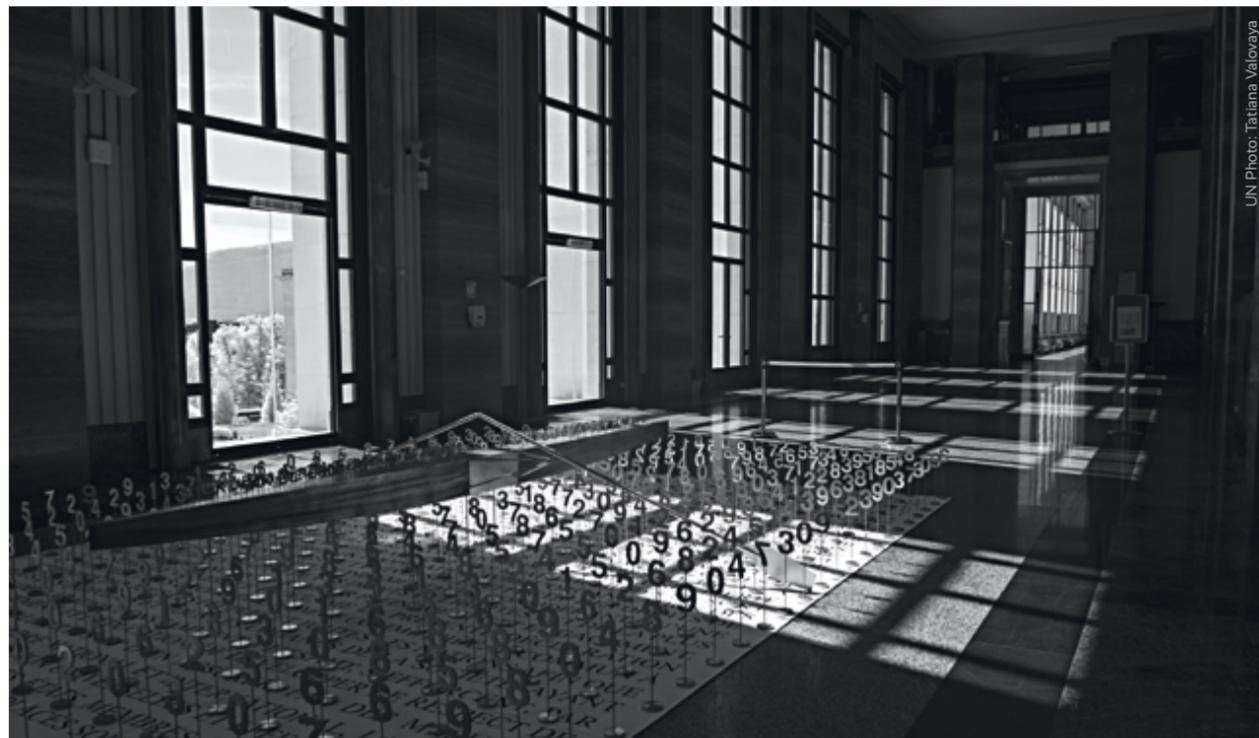
Director-General

The Director-General, Tatiana Valovaya, switched to virtual working as of 17 March. For example, she continued all her weekly meetings with UN Geneva senior management virtually, chaired inter-agency coordination mechanisms, including the Security Management Team, oversaw communications and meetings with Member States and UN colleagues, engaged with the media, recorded video messages, spoke at virtual events, and more.

The Director-General regularly came to the Palais des Nations during lockdown and worked from there when needed, with the support of a small number of staff from her Office.

The Director-General also took the opportunity to practise a passion of hers – photography – and captured images of the Palais des Nations during lockdown. She was subsequently invited to exhibit these photographs publicly in central Geneva, from 24 February to 17 March 2021, through a collaboration between UN Geneva's [Perception Change Project](#) and the [Centre de la photographie Genève](#).

In the Salle
des pas perdus during
lockdown



UN Photo: Tatiana Valovaya



UN Photo: Tatiana Valovaya

The corridors of
the Palais des Nations
during lockdown

Security Management Team

The safety and security of its staff is of the utmost importance to UN Geneva. One key mechanism for ensuring this is the inter-agency Security Management Team, which is an effective forum for sharing information and coordinating responses among the UN family in Switzerland.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unparalleled level of activity for the Security Management Team, which met over 20 times throughout 2020. Chaired by UN Geneva Director-General Tatiana Valovaya in her capacity as Designated Official for Switzerland, these meetings brought together the leaders and key officials of more than 40 UN system entities in Switzerland, and also of non-UN organizations with observer status, such as the [European Organization for Nuclear Research \(CERN\)](#) and the [European Broadcasting Union](#). In addition, representatives of Switzerland and France

were invited to present updates on the COVID-19 measures in their respective countries.

UN Geneva also coordinated regular meetings of the security, human resources, medical and communications networks that cooperate across the UN system and other organizations in Geneva.



UN Geneva
Director-General
Tatiana Valovaya
chairs a virtual
meeting of the
Security Management
Team.

Medical support

UN Geneva's Medical Service provided medical support and advice to staff and contributed to workplace safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. It implemented a dedicated telephone hotline for COVID-19 case reporting and advice, with 24/7 support available, alongside workplace contact tracing. The Medical Service also took part in a [Hôpitaux universitaires de Genève](#) study on COVID-19 antibodies by coordinating the voluntary antibody testing of 201 UN Geneva staff who worked on-site through the lockdown.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations recognized that a coordinated UN-wide approach would be needed for medical evacuation from field locations of UN personnel, their dependents, and staff working for certain international non-governmental organizations. This led to the creation in May of the [UN System-wide COVID-19 MEDEVAC Task Force](#), working under the [COVID-19 Medical Evacuation Framework](#). The UN Geneva Medical Service provided staff for the new group; a UN Geneva nurse and doctor each spent one day a week at the [World Health Organization](#) to help coordinate COVID-19-related medical evacuations.

Strategic Heritage Plan

Managing a construction project as large as the 836.5-million-franc [Strategic Heritage Plan](#) is already a significant planning and logistical challenge under normal circumstances, and this was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council of State of Geneva ordered the closure of all construction sites in Geneva in March: UN Geneva adheres strictly to both federal and cantonal decisions and, as a result, work was suspended on the construction sites at the Palais des Nations until late April, and the Strategic Heritage Plan team switched to remote working. COVID-19 also affected supply chains for the project.

The team worked hard to mitigate the impact on the project's schedule, however, and work was able to continue on the pre-construction phase of renovating the Palais des Nations' historic buildings, which included engagement with suppliers, detailed design work for the conference area of the E Building, and planning for the demolition of the E Building office tower.

Security and safety

At the height of the pandemic, UN Geneva's Security and Safety Service implemented a phased deployment plan for its staff, reducing the number of staff on duty to the minimum necessary. This maintained the security of the Palais des Nations while at the same time ensuring that an adequate reserve was always on standby to replace teams on duty. Furthermore, duty teams were kept separate to minimize the risk of any cross-contamination between arriving and departing shifts.



UN Photo: Violaine Martin



UN Photo: Matija Potocnik

A UN Geneva security officer at the Palais des Nations

A member of UN Geneva's K9 unit

Interpretation

UN Geneva's staff interpreters worked from home to ensure that business could restart as soon as possible in adapted formats, acquiring skills with new tools to assist the transition from physical to virtual ways of working. They played a key role in testing virtual interpretation platforms and developing innovative approaches to the electronic dissemination of statements, and created and contributed to a task force on remote interpretation. Staff interpreters also took the opportunity to design and implement online tests and training courses for freelance interpreters.

Virtual and hybrid conferencing

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland, UN Geneva identified the provision of virtual and hybrid meetings as crucial to business continuity. From an early stage, UN Geneva focused on adjusting its conference services business plan in order to remain efficient and relevant during and after the pandemic. This included:

- Identifying, procuring and testing IT platforms for virtual and hybrid meetings
- Upgrading rooms to support such meetings
- Preparing training materials for meeting participants

However, virtual and hybrid meetings entail significant extra costs, including software licensing and training, which were not foreseen prior to the pandemic. UN Geneva endeavoured to reduce costs related to such meetings to the extent possible by training existing staff to provide additional technical support and assistance with meeting moderation.

As a result of its preparations, UN Geneva was able to rapidly provide hybrid meeting services when a partial return to the Palais des Nations became possible, which included the provision of conference services to Human Rights Council sessions, the 2020 sessions of the Conference on Disarmament, and numerous peace talks.

What's the difference?

On-site meetings

Participants are in the conference room, interpreters are in their booths, and UN Geneva technicians control the audio and video equipment located inside the conference room.

Virtual meetings

Participants and interpreters are online using a remote simultaneous interpretation platform, and staff moderate the meeting.

Hybrid meetings

Some delegates are in the meeting room and others participate virtually. Interpreters and meetings management staff service the event from the conference room, technical staff manage the audio and video feeds, and other staff moderate the meeting.

Library and Archives

The importance of timely access to reliable information became even more apparent during the lockdown. While the UN Library and Archives Geneva maintained a limited physical presence at the Palais des Nations to serve clients and manage its records and repositories, it also adapted by offering more virtual services than ever before – quickly building on existing online resources and services not only to ensure continuity of service, but also to enhance outreach and improve the accessibility of information resources.

With the sudden shift to remote work, the demand for access to online resources increased substantially. There were 279 requests for remote e-resources access accounts for UN staff, including 120 remote access requests in March alone.

In response, Library staff created two new resource guides: “Resources for telecommuting” and “Open access resources”. Overall, digital library resources were accessed more than 350,000 times through research guides, a Global Search function, and subscription databases. In April, the Library started LibChat, an online chat service to answer users’ questions and help them find information remotely. Thus, the Library’s reference services moved from a physical desk to a virtual one, making it accessible from any location.

Archives staff began offering its consultations for researchers online, and gave virtual presentations of the League of Nations and UN Geneva archives to universities. Researchers were provided with individual access to the content digitized by the Total Digital Access to the League of Nations Archives Project via a temporary online repository.

Learning and development

The main challenge for UN Geneva’s Centre for Learning and Multilingualism was to deliver high-quality workshops and language courses during the pandemic. The Centre’s staff and students quickly and successfully switched from face-to-face delivery in the classroom to virtual learning, ensuring that effective and interactive learning experiences continued. This transition was facilitated by strong partnerships and internal IT tools, developed over the past ten years – particularly platforms for online learning and administration. The Centre also offered virtual coaching sessions to individuals, and collated and shared online resources for the personal and professional development of staff, including on topics such as working from home, mental well-being, and IT training.



A virtual language course run by UN Geneva’s Centre for Learning and Multilingualism

Knowledge and Learning Commons

The Knowledge and Learning Commons at UN Geneva is a space where UN staff, interns and diplomats can come together to share knowledge and learn informally. In the wake of COVID-19 and the transition to lockdown and working from home, the Commons worked with the Staff Counsellor’s Office at UN Geneva to deliver virtual learning sessions designed to support the mental health and well-being of staff amid the changes and uncertainties of COVID-19.

The sessions, held in English and French, included topics related to keeping a healthy mind, strategies for coping with anxiety and supporting the people around us, and mindfulness meditation. They became a positive and supportive way of keeping staff connected and increasing knowledge about well-being. The sessions reached more than 1,300 people across Geneva-based organizations of the UN system.

The other virtual sessions organized by the Knowledge and Learning Commons in 2020 covered a range of topics, such as understanding history through the League of Nations Archives, mediation and negotiation in multilateralism, the use of big data for environmental challenges, and resources available to diplomats to support their work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scan the QR code to watch a short film about the activities of the Knowledge and Learning Commons in 2020.



Staff of UN Geneva’s Knowledge and Learning Commons moderate an interactive virtual session for World Mental Health Day, with counsellors from UN Geneva, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).



Media engagement and communications

If there's one thing that journalists accredited to UN Geneva are used to at the Palais des Nations, it's the press briefings by the [United Nations Information Service in Geneva](#) on Tuesday and Friday mornings. With everyone working from home, the press briefings and other press conferences went entirely virtual from March to June. UNTV's experts put the online sound and images into the webcast version, delivering a seamless product that continued to be archived on [UN Web TV](#). The press briefings and press conferences provided the media with information about COVID-19 developments, while keeping other issues, such as providing food for hungry populations, extreme weather patterns and climate change, and trade and development, on the media's

agenda. When a limited return to the Palais des Nations began, the briefings took on a hybrid format, with journalists and spokespersons participating either in person or through the online platform.

In the early stages of the pandemic, UN Geneva also developed a virtual platform that allowed the entire local UN communication system to continue working during the lockdown period. A hybrid system was then developed, which has since supported almost every UN media activity in Geneva.



A hybrid press conference at the Palais des Nations

Graduate Study Programme

Every summer, UN Geneva's [Graduate Study Programme](#), the UN's longest-running educational programme, brings together selected graduate students from around the world for two weeks of lectures, discussions, visits to Geneva-based institutions, and group work on projects. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers decided to forge ahead in 2020. The programme switched to a virtual format, with a one-week "condensed" programme focusing on the UN at 75.

As a result, the number of students increased to 80, compared to an average of 55 in previous years. The cohort was one of the most diverse in the programme's 58-year-long history, with participants from 53 countries on six continents and in 13 different time zones. Despite not being able to meet in person, participants welcomed the "phenomenal opportunity" to connect with people from across the world.



Maria Vianca Anglo, of the Philippines, was among the participants in this year's Graduate Study Programme.

Adaptability

A number of UN Geneva staff temporarily took on new roles and tasks to support their colleagues and the work of the Organization during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Staff of the travel unit, for example – where work changed due to COVID-19 travel restrictions – assisted colleagues working on human resources, *carte de légitimation* applications, and facilities management. Staff with pre-existing medical conditions in high-contact jobs, such as mail delivery, were redeployed to UN Geneva's Facilities Management Section to support the implementation of additional health and safety measures at the Palais des Nations.

Interpreters shifted their linguistic skills from the spoken to the written form to support the translation of ad hoc documents and written materials, including the UN Geneva Annual Report 2019, COVID-19-related information, and web pages, while other staff volunteered to learn new skills to run platforms for virtual and hybrid meetings.

Safely back: returning to the Palais des Nations

While digital solutions enabled the continuation of multilateralism during the COVID-19 lockdown, UN Geneva was committed to providing a safe working environment for conference delegates, UN staff and others when it became possible to resume on-site and in-person services. This required careful planning and robust protection measures, which we developed on the basis of guidance from Headquarters, the host country, the World Health Organization and the UN system inter-agency working group of medical directors.

Swiss authorities announced a three-phased easing of the lockdown measures which took place between 27 April and 8 June, and a limited number of UN Geneva staff worked at the Palais des Nations during that time to prepare the premises for the return of staff. Starting from 8 June, UN Geneva staff made a partial return to the Palais des Nations, which ensured that the new physical distancing requirements could be adhered to. In November, however, the deteriorating COVID-19 situation in Geneva resulted in the implementation of new measures by the Canton of Geneva and a return to full-time telecommuting for many staff.

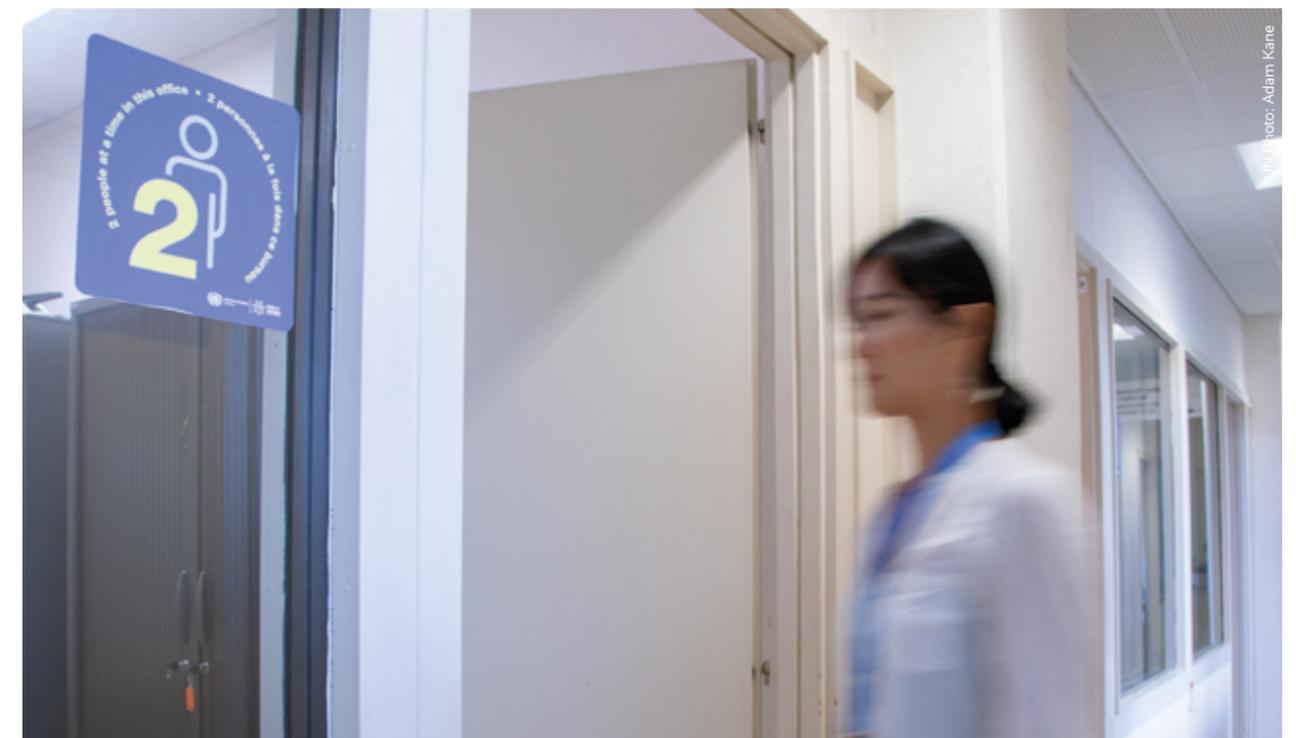
There are more than 189,587 square metres of floor space in the numerous buildings of the Palais des Nations complex. Every office and conference room had to be assessed and then set up for physical distancing. This was achieved by adapting traffic flows and seating arrangements, and by ensuring healthy ventilation and the availability of hand sanitizer and disinfectant products. Similar measures were put in place at the Strategic Heritage Plan construction sites, together with mandatory personal protective equipment and specific training on COVID-19 restrictions for those working on the sites.

Signage in the Palais des Nations to remind people about protective measures

Signage in the Palais des Nations to inform people of restrictions to the number of staff allowed in offices



UN Photo: Jean-Marc Ferré



UN Photo: Adam Kane



UN Photo: Adam Kane

Directional markings in the Palais des Nations to ensure physical distancing



UN Photo: Elodie Sabau

A handwashing station on the construction site of the new H building at UN Geneva

For conferences we established new safety rules, such as registration procedures, occupancy limits, and mask wearing, while meeting documentation went fully digital. Five conference rooms were equipped to host virtual and hybrid meetings. Due to physical distancing requirements in the interpretation booths, only three of the conference rooms could deliver interpretation in six languages; in the other two rooms, interpretation could be provided in three languages.

A meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee on 2 December with physical distancing measures in place.



UN Photo: Violaine Martin

The functions of the meeting room attendants for in-person meetings were adapted to respect the new procedures. The attendants prepared the seating protocol, which now needed to take account of physical distancing and the other measures implemented, and monitored and adjusted the list of speakers and addressed any issues arising in the meeting room. However, attendants no longer approached delegates in the room for copies of speeches, and no physical distribution of documents took place; instead, delegates were encouraged to submit documents electronically.

To facilitate the electronic distribution of documents and help meeting participants with their documentation needs, a new “Documents and beyond” tool was created in [Indico.UN](#). This pilot service also provided participants with all session- and meeting-related information, in one place. Online distribution of documents through Indico.UN’s virtual kiosk function was rolled out for meetings, starting with the 44th session of the Human Rights Council in June and July.

Thanks to UN Geneva being able to resume its conferencing activities on 15 June, a total of 4,274 meetings were held in 2020. These include 2,915 in-person meetings (of which 685 were with interpretation), and 1,359 virtual and hybrid meetings (of which 572 were with interpretation).

Despite major logistical challenges and a severe liquidity crisis impacting the United Nations, UN Geneva and its dedicated staff successfully adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown to ensure business continuity and the ongoing facilitation of multilateralism. The experience and skills gained during the first lockdown also enabled UN Geneva to smoothly adjust to the strengthened measures against COVID-19 introduced in Geneva in November in response to increasing case numbers.

Scan the QR code to read more about COVID-19 measures at UN Geneva.



Hand sanitizer was made widely available at the Palais des Nations.

Directional signage in a meeting room to ensure physical distancing.



Switching the Jet d'eau back on

Just after the COVID-19 lockdown began in March, Geneva's iconic Jet d'eau was switched off to help protect the staff who maintain the site. After 83 days, the world-famous fountain resumed operation, on 11 June. In a symbolic gesture to highlight the importance of multilateralism and international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic, the Jet d'eau was turned back on by [World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#), alongside UN Geneva Director-General Tatiana Valovaya and representatives of International Geneva.

“The United Nations stands besides its host city and country in its fight against COVID-19. This will not stop with the end of the pandemic, but will continue in the years to come.”

UN Geneva Director-General Tatiana Valovaya

