

AGREEMENT NO. 15/22 TO APPROVE THE ORGANISATION OF MEETINGS OUTSIDE OF PORT OF SPAIN FOR THE PERIOD 2022-2023

ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES (ACS)

**25th INTERSESSIONAL PREPARATORY MEETING FOR THE 28TH ORDINARY
MEETING OF THE ACS MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

ACS Secretariat, Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

(Virtual Meeting)

18th January, 2023

ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES (ACS)

11th EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

**New York, New York
21 September, 2022**

Agreement No. 15/22

**TO APPROVE THE ORGANISATION OF MEETINGS OUTSIDE OF PORT OF
SPAIN FOR THE PERIOD 2022-2023**

The Ministerial Council,

Pursuant to:

The Convention establishing the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) done in Cartagena de Indias 24th July 1994,

Ministerial Agreement 5/03 noting the Manual of Requirements for the Organisation of Meetings Held Outside Port of Spain,

Reaffirming the principles and objectives of the ACS, established by the Heads of States and Government of the Member States and Associated Members, during the First and Second Summits held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 17-18 August 1995 and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic 16-17 April 1999;

Noting the changing global environment and the need for the organisation to continue to adapt and respond in order to address arising challenges, function with efficiency and position itself to take advantage of opportunities;

Considering the challenges faced by the Association throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic and the resumption of face-to-face meetings after the period of virtual meetings which have been held in order to facilitate COVID-19 health protocols;

Considering further the dilemma faced by Member States and Associate Members having regard for logistical challenges with respect to the availability, frequency and cost of flights to attend meetings at the ACS Secretariat;

Mindful of the challenges faced by the Secretariat with regard to associated health, budgetary and logistical challenges arising out of the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic;

Conscious of the need to ensure that the processes of the organisation are in alignment with industry practices and standards; and to explore and secure the most effective use of the resources in order to support functions of the Secretariat in fulfilment of the objectives of the organisation to the benefit of the people of the Caribbean region;

Agrees to:

- 1. Approve** the Hosting of in-person Meetings in an alternative location for the period 2022-2023 or until the stated logistical issues are sufficiently resolved, in accordance with the rules provided for in Ministerial Agreement 5/03;
- 2. Instruct** the Secretariat to commence the implementation of the recommended actions.

ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES (ACS)

11th EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

New York, New York
September 21, 2022

The Secretariat of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) is charged with, according to the *Convention establishing the ACS* article XV, those functions "assigned to it by the Ministerial Council" including servicing the **"Meetings of the Ministerial Council and the Special Committees of the Association and take appropriate action on determinations emanating from such meetings;"** (XV (e)).

In this regard the ACS regulations make provision for statutory meetings of the organisation as encapsulated in Ministerial Agreement 6/19 which approved the Annual Calendar of Meetings. The ACS also hosts ad hoc and technical meetings in the execution of its functions. The organisation's regulations also makes provision for the execution of its meetings. With respect to the meeting of the Special Committees and Working Groups of the ACS, Ministerial Agreement 5/03 which contains the *Terms of Reference for the Organisation of Meetings held outside Port of Spain* Article 1 provides that the *"headquarters of the meetings of the Committees or work groups (hereinafter referred to as the meeting) of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) is the headquarters of the ACS Secretariat (hereinafter referred to as the Secretariat), however, Member States and Associate Members can agree to hold said meetings at a different venue."*

In relation to the meetings of the Ministerial Council, Ministerial Agreement 9/95 Article 10 stipulates that *"Unless the Ministerial Council decides otherwise, all its meetings and conferences shall be held at the Headquarters of the Association."*

The meetings of the ACS have for the last two years been virtual in order to comply with the occupational safety and health standards established by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and ensure continuity of the work in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic. Virtual meetings have been employed by the organization in the past using Skype in the first instance and later utilising the Polycom system to facilitate videoconferencing, then progressing to Cisco Webex and Zoom. Background regarding the application of these solutions at the Secretariat is attached at Annex I of this document. To date no system has provided a fully effective seamless solution. The currently employed solutions Cisco Webex and Zoom have aided in facilitating virtual meetings but persistent challenges include:

- Poor Internet Connection
- Problems with audio and participants being able to hear the proceedings
- Participants inability to manoeuvre the platforms
- Audio recording issues in single languages
- Open communication with the Chair and delegates

- Issues regarding country participation
- Sharing of Documents

The cost of hosting virtual meetings is estimated at:

- Interpretation Cost (per day): US\$2,600.00
- Equipment and Audio Services (per day): US\$900.00

Total cost: US\$4,000.00

In one instance the result was the cancellation of meeting. The Ordinary Meetings of the Ministerial Council have always, prior to 2020 been in person meetings and been held under the auspices of the sitting Chair unless otherwise agreed and therefore held outside of the headquarters. Other meetings such as the Intersessional and Budget Meetings have been held in-person in the headquarters country and outside subject to the approval of member states.. These meetings have on rare occasion been held at the Secretariat but in the majority of cases have been held at an offsite location at a cost to the Secretariat due to the space limitations of the Secretariat.

As the world seeks to return to some in-person activities following the pandemic, the ACS has also sought to return to in-person meetings, adopting hybrid meetings in the first instance. While the organization has fulfilled its obligations over the last two years via virtual meetings, this has not been without significant challenges.

In order to return to in-person meetings factors such as accommodation, health and safety, space requirements, logistics and budget have been considered.

Accommodation

Pre COVID – 19, the ACS Conference facility capacity was **22 persons (4 persons on the main table representing the Chair, 2 Vice Chairs and the Secretary General. The Rapporteur would be seated to the right on the main table)**. The rest of the country delegates would be seated in alphabetical order on the left and right sides of the table. On the periphery of the room with approximately 18 inches of walking space for general movement of persons and staff were seated the other members of the country's delegations. This capacity did not accommodate all of the 25 Members and 10 Associates as well as the 6 Founding Observers to be seated at the table if all were registered for a meeting at a given time. It should be noted that the format for most meetings is **1+2 per country**. The ACS would therefore book an external venue for meetings when it exceeded the 44 persons capacity at the Secretariat.

Due to the spacing requirements to hold meetings post COVID-19, the Secretariat will not be able to hold large meetings since the capacity available is now **2 persons on the head table (the Chair of a particular meeting and the Secretary General), 5 delegates on either side**

of the table totalling 10. This translates to a capacity of **12 persons** on the main table and **12 persons on the perimeter of the room.**

Health

Another relevant factor for the resumption of in-person meetings is that of health and safety requirement which remain a priority as COVID 19 and its permutations remain a concern. Therefore some of the related protocols need to be observed including social distancing are to be considered. With an already limited capacity, this increases the challenge for the Secretariat which is unable to support these requirements. An alternative must therefore be considered.

Logistics

On the matter of logistics, consideration is given to the fact that the frequency of flights to Trinidad is limited for some members and the cost is also quite high in comparison to the frequency and cost.

Budget

The Secretariat as discussed above accommodates the meetings of the Ministerial Council at an offsite location when in Trinidad and Tobago. In relation to the prospect of having meetings in another jurisdiction, a government facility can be utilised at a much reduced cost to the organisation bearing in mind that with the application of Ministerial Agreement 5/03, the host country absorbs the meeting costs and the Secretariat is responsible to the travel costs of its delegation. The approximate costs of ACS meetings is reflected below.

Cost of in-person meetings in Trinidad and Tobago (outside of the Secretariat)

In this regard, an external venue would be required for the execution of events exceeding the aforementioned capacity and the cost would be approximately **US\$12,100.00 and detailed as follows:**

- Venue/Breaks/meals: US\$5,500.00
- Interpretation Cost (per day): US\$2,600.00
- Equipment and Audio Services (per day): US\$4,000.00
- **Total cost: US\$12,100.00**

The cost of hosting in-person meetings outside of Trinidad and Tobago is as follows:

Delegation consisting of 3 persons for five days to host four meetings:, the cost will be approximately **US\$8,040.00**

- Flight: $\text{US\$1,300} \times 3 = \text{US\$3,900}$
- Per Diem: $\text{US\$1380.00} \times 3 = \text{US\$4140.00}$
- **Total cost: US\$8,040.00¹**

In light of the foregoing, the Secretariat wishes to propose that consideration be given to hosting in-person meetings of the Ministerial Council at an alternative location for the period 2022-2023, that can support more feasible arrangements with respect to accommodation and meeting costs, while eliminating the challenges that have been encountered with the technology platforms utilised to facilitate virtual meetings.

¹ Note that if the ACS will be covering expenditures such as meeting venue, interpretation and equipment services as well refreshments and meals for the meetings being held external of Trinidad and Tobago then the cost will **elevate by approximately by US\$15,000.00 per day.**

Annex I

HOSTING OF ACS MEETING

VIDEOCONFERENCEING AT THE ACS SECRETARIAT

The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) began the active use of video conferencing and web conferencing in the year 2008 under the then Secretary General Luis Andrade Falla. In the first instance, Skype and GoToMeetings solutions were used with Skype being the predominant platform and the solution used to incorporate conference calls and video calls. During this period Skype was used as a means to connect for internal meetings and in very few cases connection by one person from Member States to a specific segment of an official meeting. The time line is as follows:

- **April 7th 2008**

ACS Skype account activated and restricted only to the use of the Secretary General

- **August 08th 2008**

The initial proposal for video conferencing services was made by the then Secretary General Luis Andrade Falla to be incorporated for use in ACS business activities.

- **January 11th 2010**

Skype used for the ACS delegation to participate in the XV Ministerial Council Meeting in Colombia. Due to several technical issues and connectivity the participation was not successfully executed. Further attempts were made in February and June of 2010 with the same results and thus Skype for use for large meetings was discontinued and its use was restricted to smaller meetings with no interpretation requirements.

- **April 2012**

At the 36th Meeting of the Executive Board of the Ministerial Council (April 30th 2012), a Member State indicated one of the main reasons why some Member States were absent from

the meeting was due to budgetary constraints and suggested the introduction of teleconferencing and videoconferencing to encourage participation in meetings.

- **October 01st 2012**

A survey was sent to Members States to establish the technical capacity for video conferencing in their respective countries.

2015

The videoconference system – Polycom - was introduced as the official videoconferencing system to be used by the ACS Secretariat for official Meetings. It should be noted that the system only allowed for use of one language at a given time. The service of videoconferencing was given to members on a first come first served basis as the language that would be used would depend on the first delegate requesting the service.

This meant that delegates coming into the virtual room after the first delegate had to listen to the meeting proceedings in the predetermined language. There was also the issue of connectivity which led to delegates not being able to listen to parts of the meetings or participate as needed. Thus while there were challenges with regard to full participation and the quality of the meetings at critical segments since delegates would be disconnected. While some were able to re-establish connection others were not so fortunate. This affected quorum and consequently decision making.

2020-present

Cisco Webex and Zoom were initially utilised. Subsequently, due to the inability of some of the Membership to access Zoom, Cisco Webex has been used exclusively
