On its third day, the COP-4.2 plenary heard progress reports from the contact groups on effectiveness evaluation and Annexes A and B, and an update from the credentials committee. Plenary then reconvened the contact group on the Convention’s budget and proposed to complete the draft decision on annexes on Wednesday. Co-Chair Rodges Ankrah (US) said the contact group had decided to submit a revised Annex A to the plenary on Thursday. The Co-Chairs also sought consensus on text surrounding monitoring guidance and the number of tasks outlined in the draft decision. Discussions were expected to resume on unfinished text in the evening.

Waste Thresholds: In the group’s inaugural meeting in the afternoon, Co-Chairs Tearaporn Wiriyutikorn (Thailand) and Karissa Kovner (US) led discussions on the two options offered for thresholds for wastes contaminated with mercury and mercury compounds. One option discussed would set a total concentration threshold of 25 mg/kg but allow for tougher thresholds set at the national or local levels and envisions an expert group to develop guidance. Another option would allow work on technical guidelines for mercury waste to progress under the Basel Convention. Others raised possible practical problems in applying this approach, citing different national waste management circumstances and regulatory approaches. The EU, Chile and Switzerland announced that they would propose a joint CRP suggesting a way forward.

In the Corridors

Wednesday, as the Chair noted in plenary, often marks a special point in five-day negotiations. Many decisions are still up in the air; nevertheless, outcomes are beginning to take shape. This was the case today, as COP-4.2 reached its mid-way point and delegates hunkered down on the substantive issues, mindful of approaching deadlines. With impressive promptness, plenary adjourned almost as soon as it started in the morning. Delegates agreed to devote the entire day and evening to contact groups so that final text revisions can be reviewed and consensus reached, before reporting back to plenary for decision adoption.

In informal discussions—and with an irony not lost on anyone—delegates vacillated on whether to progress their forthcoming intersessional work through online or in-person meetings. More than two years into the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has effectively relegated everyone to home offices and virtual work, some may have overlooked the challenges that this shift still poses for certain regions of the world. In a contact group discussion, one delegate intervened to point out that the Global South lacks the ease of digital connectivity that the Global North often takes for granted. This assertion drove home the fact that where COP-4.2 is concerned, countries of the Global North and South do not just diverge on issues of transparency and accountability, they may have missed the potential of virtual work.

In its morning session, the contact group honed in on finalizing text on procedural matters such as the format of meetings for the scientific advisory group and whether the work can be effectively advanced through online work, or whether in-person meetings were preferred. Co-Chairs Ankrah and Agustin Harte (Argentina) also sought consensus on text surrounding monitoring guidance and the number of tasks outlined in the draft decision.

In its evening session, Co-Chair Rodges Ankrah (US) said the contact group had decided to submit a revised Annex A to the plenary on Thursday. The Co-Chairs also sought consensus on text surrounding monitoring guidance and the number of tasks outlined in the draft decision. Discussions were expected to resume on unfinished text in the evening.

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However, parties to the world’s youngest MEA have also shown that they maintain flexibility and willingness to alter policy stances in the spirit of compromise. Maybe, more countries will end up taking a page out of the COP-4 host’s playbook — organizing “an in-person meeting with online participation” to find the “win-win” solutions that will keep the work of this Convention going.