

## **Opening remarks by the Director-General**

### **340th Session of the ILO Governing Body**

**Monday, 2 November 2020**

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The last session of the Governing Body closed on 7 November 2019, nearly one year ago. That session – and the 14<sup>th</sup> African Regional Meeting which followed shortly after – brought to a successful close the ILO Centenary year.

There was at that time a feeling of optimism and of purpose in our Organization. That with the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work it was well equipped to confront its second centenary and the formidable opportunities and challenges of a world of work in rapid transformation.

Then, a matter of weeks later, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The life of the ILO changed – work from home, no missions, no physical meetings – but it did not stop. Indeed, we have worked hard to ensure business continuity, to stay connected with our tripartite constituents, to remain visible and to be influential in the response to the economic and social crisis generated by the pandemic. In my report to this Governing Body I give detail on what this has involved.

And if the impact of COVID-19 on the ILO has been dramatic its impact on the world of work has been nothing short of cataclysmic; the equivalent of 495 million full time jobs destroyed worldwide, labour income reduced by more than 10%, hundreds of thousands of enterprises closed or under threat, and an alarming resurgence of poverty. In sum, a devastating panorama of human suffering, and deep anxiety about what may come next.

In this context, I believe it is of crucial importance that this Governing Body has convened, and crucial too that it take the decisions which it must if the ILO is to take on and sustain the role that is widely expected of us in a human-centred recovery from the crisis that has struck the world of work. We simply cannot be seen to be missing in action. We must not carry on as if nothing has happened.

Of course, what has happened has meant that we have had to adapt our working methods radically, and we continue to do so. So let me begin by paying tribute to everybody who has worked so hard to reach agreement on this fully virtual session, with its modified agenda, and its innovative timetable and working methods. They will certainly test our technological capacities, our adaptability and probably our patience. But I ask for the tolerance and cooperation of all Governing Body members to make them work.

And at the outset, Chair, our circumstances mean that I must congratulate you on your election from a great distance rather than in person as we would all have liked to do. But I offer you my congratulations, both with sincerity and the conviction of being in your very good hands. Your leadership is the best guarantee that we will be equal to the

challenges that the novel arrangements for our meeting may present, and of course I offer you all the support of the Office in the discharge of your responsibilities.

Given the dramatic context in which we meet it is perhaps fortuitous that we have before us at this session, all at once, a series of agenda items which taken together would, at any time, be of the greatest significance in setting the future direction of our Organization and which at this particular time acquire an importance that can hardly be overstated.

Because I believe they confront us with a clear and heavy responsibility, which I would summarise as that of bringing to bear, through all modalities available to us, the invaluable asset of the Centenary Declaration to the task of promoting a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and delivering on the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

If the Governing Body is in a position to come together on this basic proposition then I believe that we are well-placed to chart a forward course for the ILO through the turbulent waters that are undoubtedly ahead, and to be equal to the ILO's historic record of meeting crisis with innovation and ambition, and becoming stronger and more influential in the process.

There should be no mistake. Just one year after our Centenary, with its ambition, vision, and its important results, the ILO is challenged as it has only rarely been to respond to the pressing needs of humanity. Business as usual would be to refuse the challenge and to fail those who look to us to help construct a better future.

The ILO, of course cannot do this alone. But it must play its role to the full. Because our mandate requires it, and because we bring two elements to the task that nobody else can. Tripartite cooperation and social dialogue which has already proven its worth in the COVID response. And international labour standards which must be the vertebra of any human centred recovery.

So, concretely, what does all of this mean for the business that we must conduct this week and next?

Let me begin with the items that fit into the ILO's established programming cycle: the preview of my Programme and Budget proposals for 2022-23, and the Strategic Plan for 2022-25. Self-evidently, these documents are compatible and complementary but without simply duplicating each other.

The Programme and Budget Preview will, in the light of your guidance, be developed into full-fledged proposals for next March with a view to final adoption by the Conference in June. Members of the Governing Body will find in this Preview an evident undercurrent of continuity with the programme of the current biennium. The eight proposed policy outcomes align strongly with those we have now, although they have

been adapted in the light of lessons learned and to meet emerging challenges. There are, I believe, good reasons for this continuity. This Governing Body decided that the current Programme and Budget should above all else operationalize the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, and it was elaborated and adopted accordingly. This operationalization cannot reasonably be considered to be the task of a single biennium. The effort needs to be managed and sustained well beyond that – with of course the necessary on-going adjustments.

I understand that it could be argued that this consistency of action has been overtaken by events – by the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. But it has been the consistently expressed view of constituents, stated most powerfully in the July Virtual Global Summit on COVID-19 and the World of Work that, far from being made outdated by the pandemic the Declaration is more relevant than ever because of it. And if so, then continuity in programme outcomes arising from that Declaration is the logical consequence.

This said, it is clearly necessary to inject into those policy outcomes a substantial “COVID-response” dimension, and this has been done systematically in the preview before the Governing Body. And at the same time, to reinforce the results framework, there are significant changes in, and I believe strengthening of, the enabling outcomes in the fields of governance and knowledge and resource management. These are not matters that will be allowed to fall from our radar screen because of other pressing demands.

The same rationale inspires the draft Strategic Plan that is presented. It is now aligned to UN system strategic planning timeframes. The priority of driving organizational improvement remains very much to the fore. And in line with the Programme and Budget Preview and complementing it at a higher strategic level, the Plan draws on the Centenary Declaration, the experience of COVID-19 and the SDGs to highlight some key challenges up to 2025, and very likely beyond that: addressing change in work – a concept at the heart of the Declaration; leaving nobody behind – the very sense of the 2030 Agenda; and the global social protection deficit, and safety and health at work, where the lessons of the pandemic perhaps stand out more starkly than anywhere else. We do not lose sight of the fact that the world of work was confronted with epoch-making processes of change and transition before the pandemic struck. They have not gone away and we need to keep sharp focus on them too.

In addition to these items, embedded in the programming cycle, my colleagues and I felt it right to present two documents specifically addressing ILO action in respect of COVID-19; one reporting on what we have done so far, and the other proposing what we should do in the future.

The former, I hope, speaks for itself. It bears witness to the resilience and adaptability of this Office in the way that we have been able to ensure business continuity. It will be for the Governing Body to evaluate how well we have done. We seek your guidance, and also recognize our duty of accountability because circumstances have required us to adjust our work programmes. And as the pandemic persists well into the

biennium the ad-hoc, initial reactive response to COVID-19 may need to give way to a more systematic reprogramming. That is exactly why it is proposed to revert to the Governing Body next March on the possible implications involved for overall programme delivery for this current biennium.

The second paper, for consideration in the Governing Body's High-Level Section contains a proposal for ILO action - and leadership – in a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. It reflects the view that the scale, gravity, and likely duration of the work of work crisis brought on by the pandemic, particularly when set beside the level and the nature of the ambition contained in the Centenary Declaration, make it imperative that the ILO act and act now to position itself, visibly and effectively, in the lead of efforts to promote a truly global response to the unprecedented challenges faced by Governments, employers and workers in all countries.

Let me be frank, I do not believe it would be understood, nor would the ILO be acting in accordance with its current responsibilities or past achievements were it to decline to take on this burden. Our first decision must be to take it on. It is perhaps in the mind of the Governing Body that this raises tough procedural questions – and so it does. And that this comes very soon after the heavy lift of the Centenary Declaration. And that is true as well.

But to those possible objections let me say simply the following. That if we can agree that an outcome document from next year's Conference is the necessary touchstone for a much needed initiative such as this and that we share that ambition, then there are a limited number of procedural options before us. If we use the opportunities of the March 2021 Governing Body, if we consult assiduously and if we prepare well then these options can work. This can be done. And it must be.

Moreover, and this is critically important, this exercise is categorically not about re-opening, or replacing the Centenary Declaration. Rather it is an endeavour to maximize the impact of that Declaration in the recovery from crisis.

Completing this bundle of items on our agenda which are of strategic significance is the proposed Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-25. This does not in any way stand apart from those of which I have already spoken, nor does it specify additional substantive content. Instead it seeks to define how one specific – and most valuable – means of ILO action, development cooperation, can be organised so as to best contribute to the objectives of our Organization.

We are not starting from zero in this endeavour. The draft strategy before the Governing Body is follow-up to the resolution adopted by the 2018 International Labour Conference and has been shaped in accordance with the Action Plan adopted by the Governing Body in November of that year. Its adoption would complete the ILO toolkit – programme and budget, strategic plan, COVID recovery initiative, and development cooperation strategy – with which we can together move forward to overcome the greatest

social and economic crisis in the history of the ILO. I hope we will all be fully mindful of what is at stake as we apply our joint efforts to that task.

If development cooperation is one of the key ILO means of action, then so is our standards-system. The interruption of some of its mechanisms over the past year has been source of real concern, so the fact that the Committee on Freedom of Association met last week and will present its report to this session is source of corresponding satisfaction.

In addition, the Governing Body has on its agenda no less than six specific country situations all of which in one way or another, are in relation to, or emanate from, complaints under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution. We have three progress reports – on Myanmar, Qatar and Guatemala - which whilst recognising the heterogeneity of the situations concerned have the common denominator of being about technical cooperation exercises put in place as follow-up to such complaints.

We also have two relatively recent cases in respect of Chile and Bangladesh where the Governing Body is called upon to decide what action to take on complaints already declared receivable and to which the respective Governments have provided their replies. And then we have the case of Venezuela where a Commission of Inquiry has already reported and the Government has indicated that it does not accept its recommendations. This for only the third time in ILO history.

It is important that I refrain from any remarks on the substance of these cases. But I will repeat what I have already said in previous sessions on matters such as these. That they should be addressed by the Governing Body on the basis of three “Ps”: process, principle, and perseverance. This is to say:

- that we must act in strict accordance with the processes set out in the relevant articles of the Constitutions;
- that on the point of principle, the sole objective is to secure full respect of the ratified Conventions in question, and none other;
- and that we must persevere because experience has demonstrated that the sought after results often take time.

And if we do all this, then the Governing Body can equally avert the danger of two other, undesirable “Ps” – partiality and politicization – often adduced unfairly to discredit or impugn the ILO’s critical normative function.

There is much other important business before us. Debates on climate change and just transition. On youth employment. On disability inclusion. We will consider the report of the Board of our greatly valued Turin Training Centre which has had to work with extraordinary determination and agility to overcome the challenges resulting from the interruption of its on – campus training activities by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will not take more of the Governing Body's time to enter into those questions.

But before concluding I must acknowledge two further points which have to do with the special working methods adopted for this session.

The first is that it has required a considerable political effort on the part of members to agree to the deferment of a significant number of agenda items until the next session of the Governing Body. I think, for example, of those on occupational safety and health, on global supply chains, on productivity, on UN reform, on multilateral system coherence, and on the human resource strategy, and that is not a comprehensive list. I thank all members for that effort – because it makes our agenda manageable and this session possible. And I need to underline too that the decision for deferral in no manner diminishes the importance or significance of the issues concerned.

The second and concluding point is that, again through the considerable efforts of Governing Body members it has been possible to deal with further agenda items through correspondence rather than here in our virtual meeting room. This has required ingenuity and creativity. But the good news is that it is working! As this session opens, already 12 agenda items have been dealt with through this correspondence mechanism. That is no small achievement and I trust we will take example and encouragement from it so that the remaining business of this first ever virtual session of the Governing Body where so much is at stake can be concluded productively and successfully.