



Governing Body

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Institutional Section

INS

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Tenth item on the agenda

Analysis of measures introduced in Governing Body meeting arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic and their relevance for future sessions of the Governing Body and other meetings

Purpose of the document

This document analyses the measures introduced in Governing Body meeting arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic with a view to identifying those that could continue to be applied for sessions of the Governing Body and other ILO official meetings (see the draft decision in paragraph 35).

Relevant strategic objective: None.

Main relevant outcome: Enabling outcome B: Effective and efficient governance of the Organization.

Policy implications: None.

Legal implications: None.

Financial implications: None.

Follow-up action required: None.

Author unit: Official Meetings, Documentation and Relations Department (RELMEETINGS).

Related documents: [GB.340/INS/1\(Rev.1.\)](#); [GB.341/INS/1](#); [GB/Special arrangements \(Rev.1\)](#); [GB.347/INS/2/2](#).

▶ Measures introduced in Governing Body meeting arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic and their relevance for future sessions of the Governing Body

Introduction

1. After the cancellation of the 338th Session of the Governing Body in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new technologies, special arrangements and adjustments to the procedures and working methods of the Governing Body were introduced on an exceptional and provisional basis to enable the Organization to react in an agile way and ensure business continuity. Subsequent sessions of the Governing Body, starting from October 2020, were held successfully, due in large part to these special arrangements ¹ and the close collaboration of constituents. The arrangements were particular to the circumstances of the pandemic and consisted of the following:
 - Constituents were provided with the possibility of participating remotely through an online platform, with a gradual return to in-person participation as soon as circumstances allowed, starting in March 2022.
 - Working schedules were adapted to enable the participation of constituents from different time zones, with sittings conducted only during core hours (noon to 4.30 p.m. Geneva time).
 - Time management measures were put in place to make the best use of the significantly reduced time available for discussions.
 - Items deemed non-controversial, after having been reviewed by the tripartite Screening Group, were submitted for decision by correspondence to reduce the number of items for discussion during the session and make the agenda more manageable. The decision-making process by correspondence sought to replicate as much as possible the ordinary process of in-person Governing Body meetings and consisted of two separate stages; first a consultation of all Governing Body members whether they approve or object but without blocking consensus, and in the event of consensus being blocked, a submission to the regular members only for a vote by correspondence. Decisions or ballots by correspondence took seven to ten days (per stage) each time and were conducted both before and after the official opening and closing dates of Governing Body sessions, when necessary.
 - The tripartite Screening Group assumed governance functions that went beyond its agenda-setting responsibilities under article 3.1 of the Governing Body Standing Orders, in particular in connection with the selection of agenda items to be submitted for decision by correspondence.
 - Two deadlines of 48 and 24 hours respectively were introduced for submitting amendments and subamendments to draft decision points.
 - In case of apparent lack of consensus on a specific item, a second discussion was immediately scheduled and if at the end of the resumed discussion, consensus could still

¹ GB.340/INS/1(Rev.1), Appendix.

not be reached, the Chairperson could opt for an in-session vote, or a vote by correspondence or deferral to the next session.

- A consultative group was established to facilitate online consultations during the session on items that required more than one discussion in order to reach consensus on proposed amendments to draft decisions, before the discussion of those items was resumed in plenary.
2. With the progressive return to the pre-pandemic situation, constituents have requested the Office to assess the challenges and opportunities created by these innovations, on the basis of the experience of the seven consecutive Governing Body sessions held since October 2020 and the feedback received from constituents. The purpose of this assessment is to provide Governing Body members with the information necessary for them to consider which measures, if any, they wish to retain, modify or discontinue for future sessions of the Governing Body and, where applicable, for other ILO official meetings.

Virtual format and existing rules

3. An important parameter of the capacity of the Organization to ensure business continuity and decision-making in the context of the pandemic, was the possibility to hold virtual meetings of the Governing Body under its Standing Orders, with a few limited suspensions of the provisions concerning for example time limits for speeches or the submission of amendments. Special arrangements and rules of procedure which were adopted for the 340th (October–November 2020),² 341st (March 2021)³ and 343rd (November 2021)⁴ Sessions clarified that the Standing Orders of the Governing Body continued to apply in full except to the extent that they were inconsistent with the special arrangements. These special arrangements were applied during the whole period with a few adaptations, one of which concerned the restoration of the possibility for the Chairperson to put a decision to a vote in the absence of consensus.⁵
4. More broadly, it may be noted that the existing rules afforded the necessary legal basis to enable the Governing Body to play a major role in the governance of the ILO, in particular in the context of the postponement of the 109th Session of the Conference from 2020 to 2021 and its numerous implications.⁶ The functions and responsibilities of the Officers of the Governing Body and the role of the tripartite Screening Group have also been critical.⁷ It may be recalled that the importance of the role of the Officers and the setting of the agenda of the Governing Body by the tripartite Screening Group were two important components of the 2011 reform of the Governing Body.

² GB.340/INS/1(Rev.1).

³ GB.341/INS/1.

⁴ GB/Special arrangements (Rev.1).

⁵ A vote by “show of hands”, through electronic means, was taken at the 341st Session (March 2021). Similar arrangements were adopted by the Governing Body for the ILO official meetings, including technical meetings and meetings of experts as well as the Special Tripartite Committee (STC) of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006). GB.340/INS/21(Add.1) and related [decision](#).

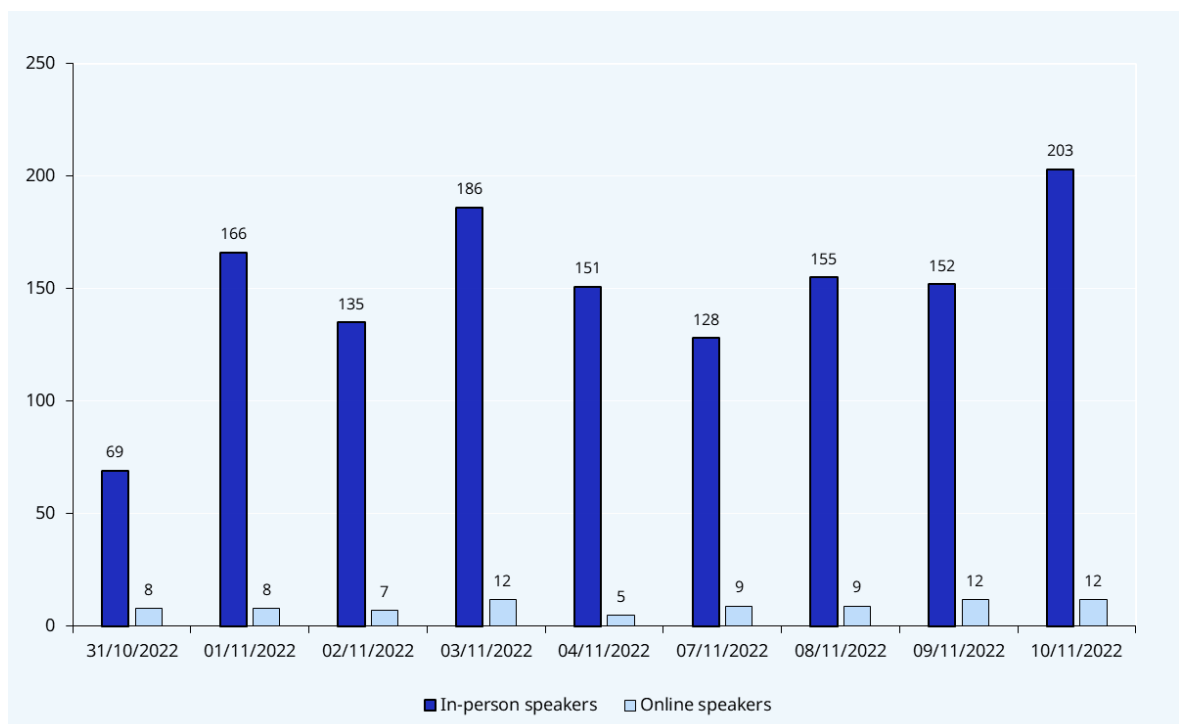
⁶ A record of the discussions and decisions taken from March to October 2020 can be found in the [minutes](#) of the meetings of the Officers with the Screening Group held over that period.

⁷ See para.10 below.

Modalities for participation

5. The 346th Session of the Governing Body (October–November 2022) was the first two-week session held fully in person since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted under regular conditions, consisting of two sittings per day (morning and afternoon), daily group meetings and an option for extended sittings, as necessary. Votes were conducted solely through a physical show of hands by those present and entitled to vote. Apart from the added feature of remote access for participants who were unable to participate in person, the 346th Session marked a full return to pre-pandemic arrangements.
6. The return to fully in-person meetings demonstrated the vital role that face-to-face interaction plays in the negotiation process and in reaching consensus-based decisions that direct the work of the Office. Nevertheless, some constituent groups have called for the option of connecting remotely to be retained for future sessions of the Governing Body in order to ensure greater inclusiveness and allow experts from capitals to follow the proceedings and provide support to their colleagues attending the session in Geneva.
7. Divergent views have been expressed on the concrete modalities for remote and face-to-face participation. It is evident, however, that remote attendance does not provide equivalent conditions for participation in terms of the impact on the dynamics and outcomes of the negotiations. Moreover, remote participants are not able to engage in informal exchanges in the margins of the formal meetings or participate in any votes that take place during the session.
8. The figures on remote participation at the 346th Session indicate widespread recognition of this reality, as illustrated in the figure below, which shows that those intervening online represented a clear minority.

► Ratio of in-person to online interventions at the 346th Session of the Governing Body



9. The Governing Body may therefore wish to continue applying the same arrangements that were in place at the 346th Session, namely a fully in-person meeting with the additional possibility for participants unable to travel to Geneva to connect remotely upon request, to follow the debates with the possibility to take the floor, but not to take part in any vote. All votes would be conducted in person, which, as the two recent votes taken at the 346th Session demonstrate, is efficient and quick. This approach would ensure that Governing Body members, who have been entrusted by the International Labour Conference to direct the work of the Office, participate in person and carry out their duties in the best possible conditions when negotiating decisions, while also allowing for inclusiveness.

Programme

Preparatory process, decision-making and the role of the Screening Group

10. It will be recalled that when the Governing Body sessions could not take place in the early stages of the pandemic, it exceptionally delegated to its Officers the authority to endorse, in consultation with the tripartite Screening Group, the submission of some items on the agenda that were deemed non-controversial to a **decision by correspondence** rather than through in-session discussion. Extensive briefings were held online prior to each relevant agenda item to ensure that Governing Body members had the necessary information to make an informed decision. This approach also offered members the possibility of submitting comments (within a specific word limit) in writing, including guidance to the Office, which were included in the minutes of the session. This proved to be an efficient and pragmatic way of dealing with the items on the agenda when the Governing Body could not meet either in person or remotely, but also during the period when it could only meet virtually, and with significantly less time available for discussions.
11. As regards the functioning of the Screening Group, it should be recalled that the facility of convening meetings at short notice and without the members being physically present, led to an extraordinary increase in the number of Screening Group meetings required for agreeing on specific issues and their average duration. In addition, virtual participation was at no time consistent with the composition, as prescribed in article 3.1 of the Standing Orders of the Governing Body.
12. With the easing of restrictions brought about by the pandemic and the return to established procedures stipulated in the Standing Orders of the Governing Body and bearing in mind the strong call from constituents for the Screening Group to revert to its original mandate, which is limited to setting the agenda of the Governing Body, no provisions were made to continue with the practice of taking decisions by correspondence at the 346th Session, as these had been part of the special arrangements introduced on an exceptional and provisional basis during the pandemic.
13. Given the heavy agenda of the 346th Session, several members of the Screening Group requested the Office to explore alternative ways of considering items on the agenda falling within the procedures stipulated in the Standing Orders and therefore not requiring special arrangements, by which potentially non-controversial items could be fast-tracked and decided on expeditiously. As requested, the Office identified six such items which, in previous sessions of the Governing Body, had frequently been decided on without much discussion. Two weeks before the start of the 346th Session, the Office conducted an information session open to all groups to provide the necessary clarifications and confirm the agreement of Governing Body members on dealing with the selected items in an expedited manner.

14. Unlike decisions taken by correspondence, however, fast-tracked items were dealt with during the plenary sittings and gavelled in sequence on the assumption that no in-depth discussions were required, while nonetheless safeguarding the right of Governing Body members to comment whenever they deemed it necessary. It should also be noted, however, that while the fast-track approach worked well in terms of time management during the session, it was not entirely cost neutral owing to the additional consultations that were considered necessary for this exercise.
15. On the basis of the comments received at the last meeting of the Screening Group held after the 346th Session, **the fast-track approach** was well received and generally considered successful. Notwithstanding the widespread support from almost all groups, the proposal to retain it for subsequent sessions, however, did not receive unanimous agreement.
16. Should the fast-track approach not be considered viable for future sessions, alternative adjustments would need to be made. The prospect of extending Governing Body sessions by one day (to ten full working days instead of nine), which some groups had proposed during previous discussions of the Screening Group, did not receive unanimous support either. With no fast-track mechanism in place and no possibility of extending the session in order to avoid several extended sittings, there are not many alternatives remaining, at the operational level, other than to find ways of reducing the number of items on future agendas, including by reassessing the classification of items (documents for discussion or for information), as outlined in the following sections. Beyond practical and stopgap measures, it may be time to consider further ways to enhance the agenda-setting mechanism of the Governing Body introduced under the 2011 reform, which was last discussed in March 2014 and March 2015.⁸

Size of the agenda and possible adjustments

17. The majority of items on the agenda are either standing items or items resulting from decisions taken by the Governing Body at previous sessions. To ensure a more manageable agenda, the Governing Body may wish to consider the following practical measures:
 - (a) extending the reporting period on some items to allow more time for the implementation of decisions and, consequently, to enable the Office to produce more meaningful reports between cycles. Careful consideration could also be given by all stakeholders to the number and frequency of follow-up reports;
 - (b) classifying items that do not require in-depth discussion or an urgent decision by the Governing Body as documents for information;
 - (c) not including draft decisions in documents that only require guidance from the Governing Body in order to avoid protracted discussions on items that ultimately do not require a decision. Such documents would indicate on the cover page that the Governing Body is invited to provide guidance to the Office. The Office would ensure that sufficient time is allotted for such discussions, to avoid having to resume discussions on such items during the second week of the session.

⁸ GB.323/WP/GBC/2 and GB.323/INS/10.

Conduct of business

Time management

- 18.** Time management measures were introduced during the pandemic to make the best use of the limited available time for discussion. As part of the special arrangements, time limits for interventions were established for each item after consultation with the tripartite Screening Group and following confirmation by the Officers of the Governing Body. At the 346th Session, when the special arrangements were no longer in force, the Office's recommendation to maintain the strict time management measures introduced for the virtual sessions of the Governing Body was endorsed by the Officers and received wide support from Governing Body members. These measures consisted of:
- (a) a tentative programme for the session, which included the approximate duration for the discussion of each item and corresponding time limits for interventions, proposed by the Office in consultation with the Officers and the Screening Group;
 - (b) group statements: members were encouraged, to the extent possible, to express their positions through group statements made by their respective spokespersons, with individual statements limited to situations where a Governing Body member did not share the views of the group or wished to add another perspective;
 - (c) advance registration in the list of speakers: Governing Body members were encouraged to register in advance for inclusion in the list of speakers, which facilitated the smooth flow of the discussions. The list of speakers was projected on the screen in the Governing Body room and indicated the time allotted for each speaker.
- 19.** In addition to continuing those successful practices, it is always possible under the Standing Orders to set strict time limits for individual speeches, either as a default procedure, which may be established for all or only for certain sections (paragraph 43 of the Introductory note to the Standing Orders), or ad hoc by decision of the Chairperson under paragraph 2.2.2 of the Standing Orders, where necessary at a particular stage of a discussion.

Consultative group

- 20.** As it was not possible for groups to engage in informal exchanges in the margins of the Governing Body meetings when they were held virtually, a consultative group was established as a temporary mechanism for facilitating consensus-building. The consultative group, composed of the members of the Screening Group and their "burden sharers" within their respective regional groups, held consultations to prepare the ground for the resumed discussion in plenary of difficult issues. Concerns were raised, however, on the composition of the consultative group, specifically in terms of representativeness and inclusiveness. Following the return to in-person meetings and taking into consideration the general feedback from constituents, this practice was discontinued after the 344th Session of the Governing Body.

Informal consultations prior to Governing Body sessions

- 21.** Numerous consultations were organized in the lead-up to the 346th Session on key items on the agenda. While constituents have generally found these consultations to be helpful, the Office recognizes that, in some instances, the late distribution of background documents hindered constituents from making meaningful contributions to the process due to insufficient time to consult within and among groups and, in the case of governments, with capitals. The Office will seek possibilities for improvement to ensure that consultation documents in the

three official languages are circulated at least five working days before consultations are held. In addition, constituents will be informed of forthcoming consultations as far in advance as possible.

22. It must be recognized, however, that there has been a marked increase in the number of consultations held recently compared with previous years. Scheduling numerous consultations, particularly between the November and March sessions, whether requested by constituent groups, by the Governing Body itself through a decision, or proposed by the Office, poses major challenges both to constituents and to the Office. The short interval between these sessions may not allow sufficient time for Governing Body members to consult with their constituents and among themselves. Five consultations have already been held in the first half of January 2023 alone, for instance. Meeting the document deadlines, not only for consultation documents but also for the final versions of those documents for the Governing Body session and producing them in the three official languages with a very quick turnaround, is stretching the capacity of the Office and could prove unsustainable in the long term, both from a financial and a human resources perspective. Providing interpretation in the three official languages for an increasing number of consultations within a fixed and limited budget has also become increasingly difficult.
23. Informal consultations to enhance active participation by all three groups was another major aspect of the 2011 reform together with enhanced Office support to tripartite constituents. It may also be time to consider further improvements in this respect to ensure that they remain a useful tool to support tripartite engagement and ownership as regards the work of the Governing Body, bearing in mind the resource constraints and the need to maintain and reinforce the transparent and effective decision-making process within the Governing Body. However, bearing in mind that consultations, whether in separate groups or tripartite, are not documented, they should not replace substantive and public discussions of agenda items at the Governing Body at the expense of fully transparent decision-making.
24. Further reflection may therefore be needed on the benefits and costs of conducting consultations, as well as on the varying expectations of what these consultations are meant to achieve.

Group meetings

25. The increase in the number of informal consultations has in turn generated an increase in the number of requests for group meetings. Notwithstanding the importance of such meetings in facilitating the work of the groups, the resources for interpretation and related costs for regional group meetings outside of Governing Body sessions are limited. The Office counts on the understanding and flexibility of constituents in finding ways to make optimum use of resources.

Amendments to draft decisions

26. To enable effective decision-making during the pandemic, Governing Body members were required to submit their amendments to draft decisions at least 48 hours in advance so that the amendments could be translated and circulated to all members well in advance of the discussion of the item.
27. With the return to normal practice at the 346th Session, Governing Body members were encouraged to submit their amendments to draft decisions 24 hours in advance, as had been the case before the pandemic, or earlier where possible. For future sessions, the Office

proposes that the regional coordinators and group secretariats inform the Office by 7 p.m. each day about the potential submission of an amendment, which should be received by 9 p.m. at the latest. Any amendments received after that time will be processed early in the morning of the following day. This will help to optimize the use of human and financial resources. The good practice of circulating the translated amendments before the morning group meetings will be retained.

28. Amendments will continue to be circulated by email through the secretariats of the Employers' and Workers' groups, and to governments through the regional coordinators, as well as through the ILO Events App.

Use of the ILO Events App

29. The ILO Events App has proved to be a useful tool, particularly during the pandemic, allowing meeting participants to receive updates on the programme and access to amendments, documents and important practical information.
30. The use of the App by constituents has increased progressively over the last few sessions and should be actively promoted in the future.

Distribution of documents

31. As has been the case for several sessions, the Office intends to continue the paperless policy and electronic distribution of pre- and in-session documents.

► Modes of participation in other ILO official meetings

32. The Office was also requested by some groups to examine the implications of the innovations introduced for other ILO official meetings. It must be recalled that various types of ILO meetings have specific Standing Orders, conceived for in-person meetings. Bearing in mind the particularities of each type of meeting, the Office will limit the scope of its recommendations with regard to other ILO official meetings to modes of participation. In addition, it should be noted that the arrangements for the International Labour Conference will be dealt with in a separate Governing Body discussion.⁹
33. Throughout the pandemic, the Office has operated under the principle of business continuity, in the same way that other specialized agencies and the United Nations Secretariat have. The Office introduced all adjustments necessary to facilitate the full participation of constituents, to the extent possible. One practical solution to address the various concerns raised by constituents would be to apply to other ILO official meetings, to the extent possible, the same approach as that proposed for future Governing Body sessions mentioned in paragraph 9 above.¹⁰

⁹ GB.347/INS/2/2.

¹⁰ As regards the Special Tripartite Committee (STC) of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006), it should be recalled that the electronic voting system used at its Fourth Meeting – Part II (5–13 May 2022) was designed to permit remote voting only for the following reasons: for the STC to gain time in view of the number of amendments to the MLC, 2006 that it had to vote on; the growing membership of the STC as more members ratify the Convention; and the complexity of the voting system provided for in the Convention. It will therefore continue to be used in meetings with full in-person attendance.

34. Technical meetings and meetings of experts would also be considered fully in-person meetings. Remote participation for accredited representatives who are unable to travel to Geneva would continue to be facilitated, on the understanding that officers and others with an active role (such as members of working parties and drafting groups) should attend the meetings in person. Furthermore, speaking rights at technical and expert meetings would continue to be governed by the respective Standing Orders.¹¹

▶ Draft decision

35. **The Governing Body:**

- (a) **decided that future sessions of the Governing Body will be held fully in person, with the added possibility for participants who are unable to travel to Geneva to connect remotely upon request to follow the debates and, if necessary, exercise the right to speak;**
- (b) **recommended that the same modes of participation be applied to other ILO official meetings, where applicable, and in accordance with the Standing Orders for those meetings; and**
- (c) **requested the Office to continue to implement the time management measures applied at the 346th Session of the Governing Body, including the fast-track approach trialled at that session to expedite items deemed non-controversial.**

¹¹ ILO, *Standing Orders for Technical Meetings and Standing Orders for Meetings of Experts*, 2019.