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Proposal for the Implementation of an Automated Voting System at IFAD

Note to Executive Board representatives

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For: **Approval**

Recommendation for approval

The Executive Board is invited to consider the present document and to approve the recommendation contained in paragraph 21.

I. Introduction

1. In its Report on the Review of the Established Practice for the Process Leading to the Appointment of the President of IFAD (GC 41/L.9), the Governing Council Bureau recommended that the Secretariat explore the introduction of an automated voting system for potential use in the appointment of the President in 2021, and that voting continue to be held by secret ballot.

2. Following the endorsement of these recommendations by the Governing Council, the Secretariat worked with the Executive Board to agree on the specifications for such a system and, based on these, a vendor[1] was selected through a negotiated procedure.[2] Besides ensuring secrecy, the main requirements identified for an automated solution included the confidentiality, verifiability and integrity of the vote. The system should also adhere to high security standards, thus minimizing the likelihood of cyberattacks.

3. In September 2020, the Board, through a vote by correspondence, approved the customization and validation of the selected system for both the onsite (with delegates' physical presence) and online (remote) options.

4. In October 2020, in accordance with the revised Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council, the Chairperson of the Governing Council Bureau, after consultation with the other members of the Bureau and the President, determined that the 2021 Governing Council session would be held by virtual means. The Secretariat, therefore, proceeded to work on the customization of the system with a view to testing the online option only with members of the Governing Council Bureau and Executive Board representatives.

II. Objectives

5. This document aims to:

    (i)   Share the results of the customization and validation of the automated voting system;

    (ii) Share the results of the testing sessions for the online option, which took place on 5 and 26 November 2020, respectively;

    (iii) Advise on next steps proposed by the Secretariat to ensure that representatives of IFAD's Member States have every opportunity to test and become familiar with the system; and

    (iv) Request the Board's approval to recommend that the selected system is ready to be used for the appointment of the President in February 2021, and thereby approve the submission of this document, together with the recommendation of the Board to the Governing Council, for its adoption of the resolution attached hereto.

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[1] The company selected through the negotiated procurement procedure was Minsait. A subsidiary of Indra Holding Tecnologías de la Información, the company is one of the world's top consulting and technology groups, with 42 years' experience in developing electoral solutions at international level. Since 2014, Minsait is a certified elections provider with the United Nations Development Programme. More information on the company can be found on their website: www.minsait.com.
[2] Please see also: EB 2018/125/R.50/Rev.2 + INF.8; GC42/L.5/Rev.1; EB 2019/128/R.56; GC43/L.8; and EB 2020/130/V.B.C.2.

III. Results of the customization and validation of the online voting system

6. The online voting system was customized to adhere to IFAD's weighted voting system, whereby Member States accrue voting rights by virtue of membership and according to their percentage share in paid contributions to the resources of the Fund. Development is ongoing to make the voting platform available in the four official languages of the Fund. This fine-tuning will be completed by early or mid-January, in time for testing with the Governing Council, which is foreseen from mid-January 2021.

7. The validation of the automated (online) voting system was carried out by a third party, Verizon. No high-risk issues were identified in the system. The medium and low risks identified are being addressed and/or mitigated, and will be revalidated in December 2020, as foreseen by the timeline.

8. The medium risk, relating to the possibility of votes being altered on compromised computers,[3] is inherent to all online voting systems. In other words, no voting system allows a service provider to control the computers being used to submit votes. Since the best way to mitigate this risk is from the user side, the Secretariat will urge all voters to adhere to following mitigation measures:

    (i) Ensure that fully updated software and current antivirus software is installed and enabled on the computers they use to vote;

    (ii) Ensure that the internet browsers used to access the system and cast votes are updated to the latest version. The following browsers are recommended: Microsoft Edge, Google Chrome, Apple Safari and Mozilla Firefox.

9. The Secretariat will also implement measures to reduce the risk of attacks, including setting a short time frame for voting, the automatic/forced logout of voters after each election round and re-authentication before each new election round.

IV. Results of testing of the online option with Governing Council Bureau members and Executive Board representatives

10. Two tests were carried out on the automated (online) voting system with members of the Governing Council Bureau and with Executive Board representatives. The first test took place on 5 November and the second on 26 November.

11. The 5 November session was very useful to fine-tune the system based on the comments made by representatives. The main issues raised were:

    (i) The registration process was too cumbersome due to the need to download "an authenticator application" on the voters' mobile phones.

    (ii) The emails received from the automated voting system often landed in spam folders.

    (iii) The voting process was relatively user-friendly and intuitive.

12. In short, there was broad consensus on the need to strike a balance between the usability and security of the system. A more user-friendly solution was therefore identified to implement two-step authentication in which a second randomly generated common code is created in real time at the opening of each round of voting. This common code is shared with voters on the screen of the meeting platform. Voters are then requested to enter the common code in order to cast the

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[3] Specifically, this is called a "man-in-the-browser attack" and can be performed only if the voter's computer has been compromised by a malicious browser plugin.

votes of the Member State that they represent. A new common code is randomly generated and shared with voters before each subsequent round of voting. The system's security relies on the fact that individual usernames and passwords are needed to access the system as well as entering the common code, unique for each round, to enable access to the voting.

13. Modifications were made to the domain address of system-generated emails to mitigate the risk of these emails being channelled to spam folders.

14. The changes described above were implemented and tested in-house prior to testing with Governing Council Bureau members and Executive Board representatives at the second testing session on 26 November.

15. This last test was well received by representatives, who were able to register to the voting portal and cast their votes without major issues. The modifications made to the system were successful. Further fine-tuning will, however, be required.

16. Participants at the second testing session agreed with the Secretariat that close coordination with the offices of Governors and Alternate Governors would be required to ensure voting went smoothly. Participants welcomed the Secretariat's plans to undertake intensive training for delegations.

V. Next steps

17. The Office of the Secretary will issue guidelines on the voting process and detailed instructions on how to access and use the system, and register the credentials of Governors/Alternate Governors.

18. In addition, beginning in mid-January, a number of training sessions will be scheduled. Provided in the four official languages of the Fund, these will target the delegates designated to cast the votes of the Member States they represent. Special training will be provided to the tellers who will be appointed by the Chair and will play an important oversight role in the voting process. The Secretariat will also offer one-on-one training sessions on request.

A. Budget

19. The Governing Council approved capital budget funding for the exploration of an automated voting system in February 2019. Of the US$210,000 earmarked for this system, 84 per cent (approximately US$ 176,000) has been committed. The remaining US$ 34,000 will be used to cover costs related to training activities, developing guidelines and quickcards, etc.

B. Indicative timeline

20. The table below sets out an indicative timeline of activities to be carried out to ensure a smooth roll-out of the automated voting system in time for its potential use for the appointment of the President at the upcoming Governing Council session.

December 2020	➢ Executive Board's final decision on feasibility of implementing and using the selected solution for the appointment of the President in 2021 ➢ Revalidation of the system ➢ Ongoing discussion with Governing Council Bureau
January 2021	➢ Training on the selected system for Member State representatives ➢ Training for tellers
February 2021	➢ Forty-fourth session of the Governing Council ➢ Final decision by the Governing Council on using the automated (online) voting system for the Appointment of the President of IFAD

VI. Recommendation

21. In line with resolution 215/XLIII and bearing in mind the positive results of the testing sessions described above, the Executive Board is requested to recommend to the Governing Council the use of the selected automated (online) voting system, should a secret ballot be called for in the context of the Council's consideration of the appointment of the President in February 2021. The Executive Board is therefore requested to approve the submission of the present document, including the draft resolution, to the Governing Council in February 2021, for its approval and adoption.

Draft resolution …/XLIV

Implementation of an Automated Voting System at IFAD

The Governing Council of IFAD,

Recalling resolution 202/XLI and the Council's decision that "the current established practice for the process leading to the appointment of the President of IFAD be continued subject to the improvements recommended by the Bureau" as contained in document GC 41/L.9 entitled "Report of the Governing Council Bureau on the Review of the Established Practice for the Process Leading to the Appointment of the President of IFAD";

Noting that by virtue of the decision above, the Secretariat was tasked with exploring electronic voting or other forms of automated processes, with a view to reporting to the Executive Board for possible submission of recommendations to the Governing Council in 2019;

Recalling its decision at its forty-second session that the Secretariat further pursue the process of assessing the feasibility of an automated voting system based on the principles contained in document GC 42/L.5/Rev.1;

Further recalling its decision to delegate authority to the Executive Board to decide, on the basis of information that Management would provide, following a successful outcome of the negotiated procedure, whether the Secretariat should pursue the development and implementation of an automated voting system, for potential use in conjunction with the appointment of the President in 2021, as contained in document GC 43/L.8;

Considering the review by the Executive Board and the positive outcome of the testing of the automated (online) voting system with members of the Governing Council Bureau and representatives of the Executive Board, as described in document GC 44/L.X;

Decides that the selected automated (online) voting system may be used in conjunction with the appointment of the President of IFAD in February 2021 and that such a system may be used on future occasions when voting by secret ballot is deemed necessary.