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Investing in rural people

## **Review of Frequency and Modalities of Formal and Informal Executive Board Sessions at IFAD**

### **Note to Executive Board representatives**

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**For: Approval**

## **Recommendation for approval**

The Executive Board is invited to approve the recommendations contained in paragraph 13 below regarding the frequency and modalities of formal and informal Executive Board sessions at IFAD.

## **Review of Frequency and Modalities of Formal and Informal Executive Board Sessions at IFAD**

### **A. Background**

1. During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected organizations' ability to preserve the efficiency and effectiveness of their business processes. The unpredictability caused by, *inter alia*, travel restrictions and social distancing measures obliged organizations to review and realign their governance operations to the "new normal" of virtual settings to ensure business continuity and maintain effective decision-making and oversight processes of their governing bodies.
2. IFAD reacted quickly and delivered strategic initiatives that will pave the way for the evolution of IFAD's business model during IFAD12.
3. Amendments were made to the rules of procedure of IFAD's governing bodies<sup>1</sup> to allow their meetings to be conducted virtually; the vote by correspondence procedure was implemented to streamline approval processes in a virtual setting; and an automated voting system was developed, tested and implemented. The online commenting feature and other tools were fine-tuned to better respond to governance needs and to facilitate gathering of feedback. Targeted outreach through informal seminars and training for members on specific topics was used to facilitate deliberations and consensus-building on strategic items.
4. This comprehensive package of processes, procedures and tools not only ensured business continuity, but also, to a certain extent, streamlined IFAD governance activities.
5. The Secretariat has taken stock of these changes to its working methods and identified some improvements to be maintained in the post-pandemic context. An informal survey among the governing body secretariats of United Nations agencies and international financial institutions was conducted to gather feedback on their experiences with virtual governance activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board and Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council.

## B. Virtual versus in-presence format of IFAD Executive Board sessions

Table 1  
Number of official and informal governing body meetings

	2019	2019 Total	2020		2020 Total
Meeting *	In-presence meeting		In-presence meeting	Virtual meeting	
Governing Council	1	1	1		1
Emoluments Committee				2	2
Replenishment Consultation	1	1	1	4	5
Executive Board	4	4		4	4
Audit Committee	4	4		4	4
Evaluation Committee	4	4	1	4	5
Working Group on the Performance-Based Allocation System				3	3
Transition Framework Working Group	1	1			
Convenors and Friends	5	5	1	5	6
List Meeting	23	23	4	12	16
List Meeting IFAD12 Consultation				9	9
Replenishment-related	2	2			
Other informal governing body meetings/seminars/training	50	50	7	27	34
Governing Council side events (Farmers' Forum, Indigenous Peoples' Forum, etc.)	3	3	2		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>91</b>

\* Includes special and reconvened sessions of official governing body meetings.

6. An analysis of the length, complexity and costs of Executive Board sessions convened in 2019 and 2020 has yielded useful findings with respect to the efficiency of in-presence and virtual meetings.
7. Direct cost efficiencies in the range of US\$35,000–US\$40,000 were realized for meetings held virtually as a result of reduced travel and hospitality costs. These efficiencies were somewhat offset by the indirect costs of language processing additional documents needed to capture responses to comments on documents submitted for review online.
8. Efficiencies were also realized with regard to time – each virtual Board session lasted an average of 5 hours per day over 3 days, while physical in-presence sessions have a duration of 7/8 hours over 2-3 days. Similar numbers of documents were submitted to the Executive Board sessions in 2019 and 2020; however, the number of documents considered in-session in 2020 was much lower. Indeed, during in-presence sessions, members have more time and opportunity to interact, which is key to consensus-building, particularly on issues of strategic importance.
9. Once social distancing restrictions have been lifted, there will be a natural tendency to return entirely to in-presence Executive Board sessions. However, this may not be the optimal solution.
10. An informal survey conducted among the governing body secretariats of United Nations agencies and international financial institutions indicates that despite an underlying tendency towards a gradual return to in-presence meetings, there is also strong interest in continuing the virtual modality for many governing body meetings, and in some cases replace in-presence meetings with online conferencing. Introduction of a hybrid modality that capitalizes on the advantages

of both virtual and in-presence meetings is also being considered. However, it should be noted that hybrid meetings may entail additional costs to meet the requirements of both virtual and in-person attendance.

11. The main findings of the survey are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2

**Advantages and disadvantages of virtual governing body meetings**

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<p><b>Reduced costs</b> (travel, accommodation, conference services and logistics) and a significantly reduced environmental footprint due to limited travel.</p>	<p><b>Hidden / indirect costs</b> related to language processing of documentation containing Management responses to Board comments on items submitted for online review.</p> <p><b>Lack of in-person interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No opportunity for informal exchanges on the margins of the meeting, which are often key for consensus-building;</li> <li>• Lack of networking opportunities and scope for building interpersonal relationships and trust among members;</li> <li>• Losing touch with delegations and lack of face-to-face interaction between Management and Board representatives;</li> <li>• Discussions more scripted, less spontaneous;</li> <li>• Difference in time zones can hinder attendance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Improved timeliness and flexibility.</b> Shorter and more effective meetings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility to organize unplanned/ad hoc meetings and manage the time slots for items to be discussed;</li> <li>• Shorter meeting agendas;</li> <li>• More efficient interventions, comments made in chat.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Technical glitches and connectivity problems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio / video issues experienced by participants and organizers;</li> <li>• Challenges with interpretation services in virtual environments.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Increased participation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional representatives from capitals, who would not normally travel, able to attend / observe;</li> <li>• Less physical overlap with other meetings;</li> <li>• Simplified meeting preparation and possibility of expanded outreach (especially for large Boards).</li> </ul>	<p>Practical challenges relating to formal adoption of decisions should representatives request that <b>a decision be put to a vote.</b></p>
<p><b>Increased digitalization</b></p> <p>New technical solutions developed and implemented. Improved electronic access to documents.</p>	<p><b>Additional expenses</b> of virtual platforms / videoconferencing tools with interpretation.</p>

12. In terms of addressing the disadvantages, IFAD has already taken the necessary steps to (i) ensure the efficient and seamless provision of interpretation services in virtual settings; and (ii) minimize video/audio and connectivity problems during the meetings.

### **C. Recommendations**

13. The above considerations were shared and discussed with IFAD's List Convenors. Based on their feedback and as part of ongoing work to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization's business processes, the following action is proposed, pandemic restrictions permitting:
- (a) The April and December sessions of the Executive Board return to being held with Board representatives physically present at IFAD headquarters in Rome. These sessions would be convened over 2-3 full days.
  - (b) The September session of the Executive Board is held virtually for a maximum of 3 hours per day over 2-3 days. Given the proximity of the session to the

summer holiday period, holding it virtually would have the advantage of avoiding travel, with the related cost efficiencies.

- (c) Pre-Executive Board consultations and informal seminars have a hybrid format, allowing both virtual and in-presence participation. This would be possible once all pandemic-related restrictions are lifted. Currently social distancing norms limit the number of representatives that may be present in IFAD's conference rooms. In the interim, these consultations and seminars would be held virtually. This approach would facilitate participation of representatives across time zones and IFAD staff in country offices.
- (d) Maintain the practice of approving standard/procedural items and project/programme proposals through vote by correspondence. Projects or programmes that are considered complex or innovative would be submitted to Board sessions for formal consideration.