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## **Review of modalities of formal and informal sessions of the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies**

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Document: EB 2022/137/R.13

Agenda: 8(a)

Date: 22 November 2022

Distribution: Public

Original: English

**FOR: APPROVAL**

**Useful references:** Review of frequency and modalities of formal and informal Executive Board sessions at IFAD ([EB 2021/133/R.33](#))

**Action:** The Executive Board is invited to approve the recommendations contained in the present document, as reflected in paragraph 26.

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**Technical questions:**

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# **Review of modalities of formal and informal sessions of the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies**

## **I. Background**

1. The COVID-19 pandemic 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 for their governing bodies.
2. In 2020, amendments were made to the rules of procedure of IFAD’s governing bodies 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 feedback. Targeted outreach through informal seminars and training for members on specific topics was used to facilitate deliberations and consensus-building on strategic items.
3. Governing body meetings were held virtually beginning in March 2020, with the necessary technological enhancements for the continued provision of interpretation services. The hybrid meeting modality was first piloted for the Executive Board in December 2021, and subsequently for its subsidiary body meetings from June 2022. These changes in meeting modalities are in line with the approach of the other United Nations Rome-based agencies (RBAs), and other United Nations agencies and international financial institutions (IFIs), which have also experienced a progression from fully virtual meetings to hybrid meetings.
4. An analysis of the length, complexity and costs of Executive Board sessions convened in 2019 and 2020 yielded useful findings with respect to the efficiency of in-presence and virtual meetings. Direct cost efficiencies in the range of US\$35,000 to 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 for the additional documents needed to capture responses and comments on documents submitted for review online.
5. The changes introduced with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – including restructuring the Executive Board agenda to lighten in-session discussions and move the consideration of certain items for review online and approval through vote by correspondence – also resulted in efficiencies with regard to time. While similar numbers of documents were submitted to the Board sessions held between 2019 and 2021, the number of documents considered in-session from 2020 onwards was much lower. Virtual Board sessions lasted an average of five hours per day over three days, compared to physical in-presence sessions averaging seven or eight hours over two to three days. The 135<sup>th</sup> session of the Executive Board, which was held in hybrid modality in full-day format, required only two days for consideration of the in-session items. 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.
6. The Office of the Secretary took stock of changes and in September 2021 submitted proposals to the Executive Board regarding changes to its working methods. The Board considered that additional time was required to decide on modalities for future Board sessions. Management’s proposal to pilot in-presence meetings for the 134<sup>th</sup> and 135<sup>th</sup> Board sessions and for the Board’s subsidiary body meetings, conditions permitting, while offering the hybrid modality for representatives unable to attend in person, was approved. The Board called for a further stock-take of

lessons learned and recommendations on a proposed way forward to be submitted to the Board at a future session. The proposed changes presented in this document are based on the findings of an informal survey among other United Nations agencies and IFIs, as well as a survey conducted with Board representatives in October 2022.

7. In 2023, Management will also present a proposal to the Executive Board for consideration to streamline and reduce documentation submitted to the Board and its subsidiary bodies. The proposal will identify opportunities to lessen the frequency, volume and flow of documentation that is currently transmitted to the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies for review and approval.

## II. Proposed review of modalities

### A. Streamlining in-session deliberations

8. **Online review of documents:** In-session deliberations of the Executive Board have been streamlined through the increased use of online review of documents. Through this procedure, Board representatives may submit comments through the e-board of the Member States Interactive Platform (MSIP) for certain types of documents for review, to which Management provides a written response online. Following the Board session, a document containing all comments and Management responses is posted on the platform in the four official languages of the Fund.
9. Documents for review that are eligible for this procedure include, among others: standard and recurring financial reports; progress reports on corporate matters; and country strategic opportunities programmes (COSOPs) and country strategy and programme evaluations already discussed during pre-Board consultations.
10. While the increased use of this procedure has resulted in additional costs for language processing of documentation containing Management responses to representatives' comments, these have been offset by time efficiencies in the in-session deliberations. Going forward, three options may be considered with respect to documents for review, on the understanding that any item for review may be placed on the agenda for in-session consideration at the request of a member or alternate member of the Executive Board:
  - (a) Continuing the practice of considering documents for review online through the MSIP commenting feature – under this option, the language processing costs for comments and Management responses would be offset by time efficiencies;
  - (b) Discontinuing the use of the commenting feature and expanding the pre-Board consultations on COSOPs, project/programme proposals and non-sovereign private sector operations (NSO) proposals to cover all items for Executive Board review, sharing comments in-session through a final report on the consultation issued in four languages – this would entail additional costs related to longer pre-Board consultations, interpretation and translation; or
  - (c) Considering all items for review in-session – this would entail additional costs as a result of longer Executive Board sessions to ensure sufficient time for consideration of all items.
11. Executive Board representatives expressed a preference for option (a), i.e. continuing the practice of considering documents for review online through the MSIP commenting feature.
12. **Recommendation:** With a view to continue streamlining in-session deliberations, even in the post-pandemic era, and considering the feedback received from representatives, it is recommended that the practice of considering documents for review online through the MSIP commenting feature be continued, with the

understanding that any such item may be placed on the agenda of an Executive Board session for in-session consideration at the request of a Board member or alternate member.

13. **Approval methods:** In-session Executive Board deliberations have also been streamlined through the use of the vote by correspondence procedure to approve documents that have already been considered in other meetings (e.g. pre-Board consultations), and/or standard/procedural items. With this procedure, once the Board agenda is adopted in-session, representatives are invited to take action on the items for approval through vote by correspondence. Any of these items may be placed on the Board agenda for consideration in-session at the request of a member or alternate member of the Board, provided that this request is received by the Office of the Secretary at least one week prior to the commencement of the Board session.
14. Documents for approval that are eligible for this procedure include, among others: project/programme and grant proposals and NSO proposals already considered at the pre-Board consultations, and standard items, such as draft provisional agendas for upcoming Governing Council sessions.
15. The use of the vote by correspondence procedure has significantly streamlined approval processes by the Executive Board by freeing up time for in-session deliberations. However, this procedure is resource heavy as it requires significant follow up on the part of both Member State representatives and the Office of the Secretary to ensure that the majority requirements are met and that these items are duly approved within the prescribed timeline, and results in delays in communicating project/programme approvals to Governments. Furthermore, the timing of approval for items submitted to the Executive Board at the December session through the vote by correspondence procedure is problematic given the proximity to year-end and financial account closures. Going forward, three options may be considered with respect to documents for approval, on the understanding that any item for approval may be placed on the agenda for in-session consideration at the request of a member or alternate member of the Board:
  - (a) Continuing the practice of approving standard/procedural items, project/programme and grant proposals, and NSO proposals through vote by correspondence;<sup>1</sup>
  - (b) In-session "batch" approval of items identified in the Executive Board agenda (see paragraph 16 for details); or
  - (c) Considering all items for approval in-session.
16. In benchmarking with other organizations, Management found the approval process used in the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>2</sup> to be of particular interest. In both instances, the agenda is presented with two types of items: "A" items or points and "B" items or points. "A" items or points are those which have already been discussed in other committees or bodies and are therefore not proposed for discussion, but rather presented for approval as a group at the beginning of the relevant governing body meeting. In consultation with the Chairperson of the Board, such in-session "batch" approval could be applied to items considered unlikely to generate debate, including: standard/procedural items, as is currently the case for items submitted for approval through vote by correspondence; and project/programme and grant proposals and NSO proposals already considered at the pre-Board consultations. In consultation with the Chairpersons of the Board's subsidiary bodies, certain items transmitted to the Board for approval that have already been reviewed and

<sup>1</sup> Projects or programmes that are considered complex or innovative would continue to be submitted to the Executive Board for formal consideration in session.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/legal/Resolution-Governance-Decision-Making.pdf>.

endorsed by such subsidiary bodies could also be considered for the “batch” approval procedure. As is the case for the current vote by correspondence procedure, these items could be placed on the Board agenda for consideration in session at the request of a member or alternate member of the Board. At the start of the Board session and following the adoption of the agenda, the Chairperson would seek batch approval of these items.

17. **Recommendation:** While the majority of Executive Board representatives expressed a preference for continuing to approve items through vote by correspondence, and bearing in mind the potential efficiency gains from further streamlining approval processes, it is recommended that in-session batch approval be adopted on a pilot basis for items so identified in the Board agenda, as described in paragraph 16. This pilot would cover all Board sessions in 2023, after which Management will report to the Board on the outcome of the pilot and seek a decision as to whether the batch approval process should continue.
18. **Time limit for interventions:** The implementation of virtual and, more recently, hybrid meetings highlighted the importance of concise and succinct interventions during governing body sessions. This is true both for meeting participants and for interpreters, whose task is rendered more difficult by the online environment, which is subject to issues related to, inter alia, connectivity, sound quality and audio devices. In order to take into consideration time zones, interpretation challenges, online platform fatigue and, more broadly best practice, in the efficient use of representatives’ time, the implementation of a time limit for interventions is proposed.
19. **Recommendation:** In order to promote the efficient use of time and ensure that all members have equal opportunity to intervene as needed, a time limit will be set for representatives’ interventions during sessions of the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies. It is proposed that the time limits for interventions be three minutes for individual statements and five minutes for statements made on behalf of a group of Member States (e.g. List statements).

## **B. Participation modalities**

20. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in governing body meeting modalities across organizations. An informal survey conducted among the governing body secretariats of United Nations agencies and IFIs in 2021 indicated that despite an underlying trend towards a gradual return to in-presence meetings, there was also strong interest in continuing the virtual modality for many governing body meetings, and in some cases replacing in-presence meetings with online conferencing.
21. A follow-up informal survey was conducted among the same group in October 2022 (see annex for the summary findings and survey questionnaire). Findings indicate that, across organizations, there has been a shift towards hybrid meetings, which, although often more demanding and costly in comparison to fully in-presence or fully virtual meetings, provide tangible benefits for meeting participants in terms of both flexibility and reduced travel costs. Notwithstanding this, responses noted the benefits of fully in-presence meetings, namely stronger interpersonal relationships and trust among members. One organization characterized these benefits as having all participants on an equal level of participation, while another organization that was moving towards a virtual or hybrid modality for all meetings noted that in 2021 it had reverted to fully in-presence meetings for its Board of Directors to rebuild a group dynamic and enhance commitment and engagement, which had suffered from one year of fully virtual and hybrid meetings. While organizations continue to encourage in-person participation, participants will have the option of connecting virtually in most organizations going forward. One organization noted that while Member States insisted on in-person meetings for negotiations, many delegates opted for virtual attendance, provided that the meeting platform was stable and

easy to use – and that there was no expectation to return to fully in-person meetings, except for the rare meetings requiring voting. The survey also revealed that some organizations are adopting different meeting modalities for different governing bodies, with some meeting in-presence and others in virtual or hybrid mode.

22. IFAD's sister RBAs are organizing most meetings in either hybrid or fully virtual format, and report that they have experienced a decrease in in-person attendance at hybrid meetings. This is similar to current IFAD practice, with recent sessions of the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies held in hybrid format, and other meetings such as informal seminars, pre-Board consultations and meetings of Convenors and Friends held virtually.
23. Table 1 summarizes the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the different meeting modalities based on IFAD's experience.

**Table 1**  
**Advantages and disadvantages of different governing body meeting modalities**

	<i>Fully in-presence</i>	<i>Fully virtual</i>	<i>Hybrid</i>
<i>Advantages</i>	<p><b>Increased opportunities for in-person interactions and consensus-building</b>, including informal exchanges on the margins of the meeting and opportunities for building interpersonal relationships and trust among members and with Management.</p> <p><b>Interpretation services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretation costs may be lower compared to the hybrid or virtual context as interpretation shifts can be longer;</li> <li>• Fewer interruptions to interpretation resulting from speakers' connectivity issues.</li> </ul> <p>Facilitated procedures for the formal adoption of decisions should representatives request that <b>a decision be put to a vote</b>, compared to the virtual and hybrid modalities.</p>	<p><b>Reduced costs</b> (travel, accommodation, conference services and logistics)</p> <p><b>Reduced environmental footprint</b> due to limited travel.</p> <p><b>Facilitated participation</b> - Additional representatives from capitals, who would not normally travel, able to attend or observe. Furthermore, increased time efficiency for meeting participants connecting virtually, with no need to commute to the meeting venue.</p> <p>Increased <b>flexibility in case of unforeseen events</b> that may preclude the ability to hold in-presence meetings.</p>	<p><b>Partly reduced costs</b> (reduced travel costs)</p> <p><b>Reduced environmental footprint</b> due to limited travel.</p> <p><b>Facilitated participation</b> - Additional representatives from capitals, who would not normally travel, able to attend or observe. Furthermore, increased time efficiency for meeting participants connecting virtually, with no need to commute to the meeting venue.</p> <p>Increased <b>flexibility in case of unforeseen events</b> that may preclude the ability to hold in-presence meetings.</p>
<i>Disadvantages</i>	<p><b>Cost implications</b> linked to travel, accommodation, conference services and logistics.</p> <p><b>Higher environmental footprint</b> due to increased travel.</p> <p><b>Caps on number of meeting participants</b> due to capacity of meeting venue.</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, particularly for new Executive Board members;</li> <li>• Losing touch with delegations and lack of face-to-face interaction between Management and Board representatives.</li> </ul> <p><b>Interpretation services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be subject to different rules in virtual and hybrid environments, compared to in-presence meetings, leading to higher costs. Interpretation shifts are necessarily shorter given the increased difficulties posed by the virtual or hybrid environment. This may entail recruiting a higher number of interpreters for a given meeting;</li> <li>• Additional expenses of virtual platforms and videoconferencing tools with interpretation;</li> <li>• Disruption of interpretation services should participants face issues with connectivity or fail to</li> </ul>	<p><b>Increased costs</b> (particularly in terms of human resources) given the need to service both an in-person and a virtual meeting simultaneously.</p> <p>Expectations for reduced travel costs and reduced environmental footprint due to limited travel may be partly or completely offset should members decide to participate in-presence for part of the meeting and virtually for another portion.</p> <p><b>Limited in-person interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for informal exchanges are limited to participants physically present at the meeting venue, impacting consensus-building and networking opportunities among members;</li> <li>• Virtual participants cannot engage in “side-bar” negotiations, thus hindering inclusion and consensus-building.</li> </ul> <p><b>Interpretation services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be subject to different rules in virtual and hybrid environments, compared to in-presence meetings, leading to higher costs. Interpretation shifts are necessarily shorter given the increased difficulties posed by the virtual or hybrid</li> </ul>

	<p>comply with associated etiquette (use of headsets, adequate microphones, etc.)</p> <p><b>Logistical considerations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference in time zones can hinder attendance;</li> <li>• The need to take time differences into account to the extent possible means that fewer hours can be allocated per day, thus resulting in meetings over an extended number of days;</li> <li>• Participants may encounter audio/video challenges based on the reliability of their connectivity.</li> </ul> <p>Practical challenges relating to formal adoption of decisions should representatives request that <b>a decision be put to a vote</b>, particularly if the vote is to be by secret ballot and bearing in mind that the use of an electronic voting system at IFAD must first be approved by the Executive Board.</p>	<p>environment. This may entail recruiting a higher number of interpreters for a given meeting;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional expenses of virtual platforms and videoconferencing tools with interpretation;</li> <li>• Disruption of interpretation services should participants face issues with connectivity or fail to comply with associated etiquette (use of headsets, adequate microphones, etc.)</li> </ul> <p><b>Logistical considerations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference in time zones can hinder attendance;</li> <li>• The need to take time differences into account to the extent possible means that fewer hours can be allocated per day, thus resulting in meetings over an extended number of days;</li> <li>• Participants may encounter audio/video challenges based on the reliability of their connectivity.</li> </ul> <p>Practical challenges relating to formal adoption of decisions should representatives request that <b>a decision be put to a vote</b>, particularly if the vote is to be by secret ballot and bearing in mind that the use of an electronic voting system at IFAD must first be approved by the Executive Board.</p>
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24. In response to the survey conducted in September 2022, Executive Board representatives expressed a preference for a return to holding in-presence sessions of the Board in the post-pandemic era. With regards to subsidiary body meetings, feedback was mixed, with about two thirds of respondents preferring fully in-presence meetings, and one third preferring fully virtual meetings. While there has been a distinct upward trend in participation in the recent Board sessions held in presence, this has not been the case with meetings of subsidiary bodies, where reduced participation in-presence and increasing requests to participate virtually have been observed.
25. **Recommendation:** Bearing in mind IFAD's experience with the various meeting modalities, the need to accommodate participation across time zones, the trends in IFAD since piloting a return to in-presence meetings, trends in comparator organizations, and the feedback received from Executive Board representatives, the following recommendations are proposed:
- (a) As long as there are COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions on travel and participation, the hybrid modality will continue to be offered for all meetings held in-presence in order to ensure broad participation of the Membership;
  - (b) Pre-Board consultations will be held in fully virtual format. This will facilitate adequate and cost effective participation of IFAD country teams, when needed, given the increasingly decentralized nature of the organization;
  - (c) Informal seminars will be held in fully virtual format;
  - (d) Meetings of Convenors and Friends will be held fully in-presence at IFAD headquarters, with the option for virtual meetings should time constraints or other reasons preclude meeting in-presence;
  - (e) Meetings and sessions of subsidiary bodies of the Executive Board will be held fully in-presence at IFAD headquarters, with the hybrid modality available to those unable to be in Rome for the meeting; and
  - (f) Executive Board sessions:
    - (i) The April/May and December sessions will be held fully in-presence at IFAD headquarters, over two to three full days. The in-presence modality is the preferred modality for these sessions given the Executive Board retreat, which is usually held in conjunction with the April/May session, the consideration of strategic items, such as IFAD's proposed programme of work and budget for the following year, at the December session, and in order to foster stronger interpersonal relationships among and between members and Management; and
    - (ii) The September session will be held virtually for a maximum of five hours per day over two to three days. Given the proximity to the summer holiday period, holding virtual meetings will have the advantage of avoiding travel, thus providing representatives with greater flexibility.

### III. Recommendations

26. The Executive Board is requested to consider and approve the recommendations contained in paragraphs 12, 17, 19 and 25, which aim to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization's governance processes.

## Summary findings of the informal follow up survey on governing body meeting modalities

1. The Office of the Secretary of IFAD conducted an informal survey among the governing body secretariats of United Nations agencies and IFIs in 2021 on the changes in governance modalities brought about as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A follow-up informal survey was conducted among the same group in October 2022 (the questionnaire is reported below), and 19 responses were received (seven from the United Nations agencies group and 12 from the IFI group).
2. The main outcomes and considerations resulting from the follow-up survey can be summarized as follows:
  - (a) The majority of responses indicated a **shift towards the hybrid meeting modality**, and that this would be the preferred modality going forward. While several organizations encouraged in-person participation for governing body meetings, the possibility to connect virtually would continue to be an option. One organization noted that while it was moving towards offering virtual/hybrid modality for all meetings, in 2021 it had reverted to fully in-presence meetings for its Board of Directors “to rebuild a group dynamic and enhance commitment/engagement, that suffered from one year of fully virtual and hybrid meetings”.
  - (b) Only four organizations reported that they would return to fully in-presence meetings, with one highlighting that this would ensure a level playing field for all participants, another noting that discontinuing the virtual modality would prevent incurring additional costs to cover additional interpretation sessions and the costs of interpretation technology, and another noting that its plans for a fully in-person modality may continue to evolve in the future. A fifth organization noted that no decision had yet been taken on whether or not to return to fully in-presence meetings.
  - (c) Respondents highlighted the **benefits of continuing to hold governing body meetings in hybrid format**. These included, among others, added flexibility for meeting participants, and reduced travel costs and environmental footprint. Some of the feedback provided on hybrid meetings included:
 

“This hybrid modality, as stated before, has been very efficient and flexible, considering that not all directors reside permanently in headquarters. In the case of [governing body] meetings, it has also proved to be very efficient in allowing high-level officials to partake, instead of them delegating the participations in alternate or temporary governors.”

“Hybrid has become the standard format for meetings of formal or semiformal [organization name] governing bodies, despite the fact that hybrid meetings are more demanding and costly than fully in person or fully online meetings.”

“We have observed that while Member States insist on in-person meetings for negotiations, many delegates opt for virtual attendance, provided that the platform is stable and easy to use. There is no expectation to return to fully in-person meetings, except for the rare meetings requiring voting.”
  - (d) A few organizations reported using **different meeting modalities for different governing bodies** - for example, holding their main governing

body meeting in presence, while offering the virtual or hybrid modality for other committee and Board meetings. One organization noted that for some of its governing bodies, half of the meetings were planned in-presence and the other half were planned virtually.

- (e) **New practices** introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that organizations are planning to retain going forward related to the use of virtual voting procedures and other technological advancements such as specialized information technology (IT) platforms for holding governing body meetings.

### Survey questionnaire

Moving forward in the post-pandemic era,

1. Is your organization planning to return to fully in-presence governing body meetings (i.e. with no possibility for delegates to connect virtually)?
  - (a) Please specify if this will apply to all governing bodies and/or if different modalities are expected for different governing bodies and subsidiary bodies.
2. Will your organization adopt mixed meeting modalities for different governing bodies? For example, with the main governing bodies meeting in person while smaller subsidiary bodies or working groups only meeting virtually or in hybrid modality.
3. Will your organization continue to offer:
  - (a) Virtual meetings (i.e. with all delegates connecting virtually and none physically present)?
  - (b) Hybrid meetings (i.e. with some delegates physically present and others connected virtually)?
  - (c) Please provide additional details, including the reasons for continuing or discontinuing these meeting modalities.
4. Is your organization planning to retain any new practice introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have resulted in more efficient governance methods? For example, streamlining meeting agendas by moving the consideration of certain items before or after the meeting itself. Please provide more details.