
Method of work of the Health Assembly

Report by the Secretariat

1. At its 122nd session in January 2008, the Executive Board considered a report on the method of work of the Health Assembly. During the discussion, it was proposed that the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee should, at its eighth meeting, consider how the meetings of the General Committee of the Health Assembly could be made more efficient and less time-consuming.¹ The present report is submitted in response to that proposal.

2. The main functions of the General Committee are set out in Rule 33 of the Rules of Procedure of the World Health Assembly.² The General Committee also plays an important role under Rule 102 in proposing to the Health Assembly a list of Member States entitled to designate persons to serve on the Executive Board. Moreover, the Health Assembly has on occasion assigned further tasks to the General Committee, such as that of considering the provisional timetable proposed by the Executive Board. The General Committee normally holds two meetings during sessions of the Health Assembly. The first is held on the Monday morning to consider (1) the provisional agenda of the Health Assembly prepared by the Executive Board at its January session; (2) proposals for supplementary agenda items; (3) the programme of work of the Health Assembly and a proposed timetable; and (4) the allocation of items to the main committees. The second meeting is held on the Wednesday

¹ See document EB122/2008/REC/2, summary record of the eighth meeting, section 2.

² In addition to performing such duties as are specified elsewhere in these Rules, the General Committee, in consultation with the Director-General and subject to any decision of the Health Assembly, shall:

- (a) decide the time and place of all plenary meetings, of the meetings of the main committees and of all meetings of committees established at plenary meetings during the session. Whenever practicable, the General Committee shall make known a few days in advance the date and hour of meetings of the Health Assembly and of the committees;
- (b) determine the order of business at each plenary meeting during the session;
- (c) propose to the Health Assembly the initial allocation to committees of items of the agenda, and if appropriate the deferment of any item to a future Health Assembly;
- (d) transfer subsequently items of the agenda allocated to committees from one committee to another, if necessary;
- (e) report on any additions to the agenda under Rule 12;
- (f) co-ordinate the work of the main committees and all committees established at plenary meetings during the session;
- (g) fix the date of adjournment of the session; and
- (h) otherwise facilitate the orderly dispatch of the business of the session.

afternoon to examine proposals relating to the membership of the Executive Board and to review progress in the work of the Health Assembly and its main committees.

3. Although the second meeting of the General Committee is normally of short duration, its first meeting has sometimes been protracted, thus delaying the adoption of the agenda of the Health Assembly, the address by the Director-General and the beginning of the general debate. The agenda of the first meeting of the General Committee requires it to deliberate on a number of issues of importance for the effective work of the Health Assembly; this also prompts statements by, and debate among, members of the Committee and representatives of other Member States who attend as observers. Consequently, it is partly owing to the nature of the work to be performed that the first meeting of the General Committee tends to last longer. However, a frequent reason for the longer duration of its first meeting is the consideration by the General Committee of proposals for supplementary agenda items, which have on occasion generated long debate.

4. Proposing supplementary agenda items is a prerogative of Member States under the Rules of Procedure, but the fact that the same item or very similar items have been proposed, and rejected, at several consecutive sessions of the Health Assembly has raised concern on the part of many Member States about the relevance of those items for the work of WHO and the effective use of the limited time available to the Health Assembly. Given the different views expressed by Member States on this issue, as well as the provisions set out in the Rules of Procedure with regard to the adoption of the agenda and the conduct of business of the Health Assembly and its committees, the Secretariat wishes at this stage to submit for consideration by the Board, through the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee, some general considerations on how the discussion by the General Committee of proposals for supplementary agenda items could be streamlined.

Criteria for the proposal of supplementary agenda items for the Health Assembly

5. In order to streamline and rationalize the inclusion of proposed additional items in the provisional agenda of the Executive Board, the latter has, by resolution EB121.R1, endorsed the following criteria for inclusion of proposed additional items: “proposals that address a global public-health issue, or involve a new subject within the scope of WHO, or represent a significant public-health burden”. These criteria are meant to serve as guidance for the Director-General and the officers of the Board to recommend inclusion, deferment or exclusion of proposals for additional agenda items when drawing up the provisional agenda of the Board pursuant to Rule 8 of its Rules of Procedure. They are also intended to guide Member States with respect to proposals they may make for additional agenda items. Member States may wish to consider introducing the same or similar criteria in the Health Assembly to guide the General Committee in the consideration of proposals for supplementary agenda items, and also to guide Member States in connection with their proposals for such items.

Criteria to guide the discussion of the General Committee

6. The relevant part of Rule 40 of the Rules of Procedure of the United Nations General Assembly reads as follows: “In considering matters relating to the agenda of the General Assembly, the General Committee shall not discuss the substance of any item except in so far as this bears upon the question whether the General Committee should recommend the inclusion of the item in the agenda, the rejection of the request for inclusion or the inclusion of the item in the provisional agenda of a future session ...” Member States may wish to consider introducing the same or a similar formulation in the Rules of Procedure of the World Health Assembly relating to the General Committee. This requirement could at least assist the Chairman of the Committee in guiding and limiting the debate on

proposed supplementary agenda items, and in calling to order speakers who make statements not falling within those terms.

Participation in the meetings of the General Committee

7. Under Rule 32 of the Health Assembly's Rules of Procedure, meetings of the General Committee may be attended by not more than one member of each delegation not represented thereon. Such members may participate without vote in the deliberations of the General Committee if so invited by the Chairman. It should be noted in this connection that, in a few cases, the lengthy nature of the debate on proposed supplementary agenda items was due to the large number of statements both by members of the General Committee and by other Member States. Member States may wish to consider limiting the debate on a proposal for an additional agenda item to a predetermined number of statements, for example a maximum of two in favour of inclusion and two against. This would ensure a fair but more time-sensitive expression of possibly differing views on the addition of a new item to the agenda.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

8. The Executive Board is invited to comment on the present report and provide guidance to the Secretariat.

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