Matters emanating from the Agile Member States Task Group on Strengthening WHO's Budgetary, Programmatic and Financing Governance

Project plan: implementation of digital solutions for interactions between the Secretariat and Member States on matters related to the governing bodies

Report by the Director-General

BACKGROUND

1.   Since its establishment, WHO has continued to adapt to address emerging global health challenges, including those impacting its governance. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Health Assembly was held in virtual format for the first time. Since then, several constitutional – and the majority of intergovernmental – meetings have been held in either virtual or hybrid form. The volume of meetings has also increased; in 2022, the number of governing bodies meetings has more than tripled compared with pre-pandemic levels. This digital shift, together with the higher profile of the global health agenda following the pandemic, is placing a strain on obsolete IT tools that were not designed to deal with the volume and intensity of the workload. As a result, the Secretariat is facing the challenge of finding appropriate IT solutions so that Member States' expectations can be met and their engagement with the Secretariat facilitated in order to ensure the effective governance of the Organization.

2.   The implementation of digital solutions in the Department of Governing Bodies, which has overall corporate responsibility for contact management and official correspondence, represents a major step towards modernizing how the Secretariat engages with Member States on matters relating to the work of the governing bodies and all other official communications. This work aligns with the mandates contained in decision WHA69(8) (2016) on the improvement of information technology tools for better access to governing body meetings and documentation, and decisions EB152(15) and EB153(2) (2023), in which the Secretariat was requested to prepare a project plan for the proposed implementation of digital solutions for the governing bodies.

3.   The Secretariat's existing mechanisms for interacting with Member States primarily rely on obsolete IT systems – including chronically outdated and overlapping contact databases – and the manual preparation of essential email communications and correspondence. Such mechanisms are unable to meet the dynamic demands of modern cooperation at the international level, increasingly leading to delays and communication failures, the resending of communication leading to confusion and, at times, situations where Member States do not have access to information critical to their

meaningful engagement with various governing body processes. The implementation of digital solutions seeks to remedy such problems using modern digital solutions, tailored to the needs of the Secretariat and of Member States.

4.   This project plan outlines the strategic approach to implementing digital solutions to enhance interaction between the Secretariat and Member States on governing body matters and other formal communications/correspondence. The plan is designed to cover key aspects of the project, such as its scope, objectives, approach, stakeholders, schedule and resources, as well as risk management, change management issues and communication.

SCOPE

5.   The project plan for the implementation of digital solutions covers four major components, including the following deliverables:

(a)   **Searchable online database of WHO resolutions and decisions:** a multilingual WHO portal to access and search the resolutions and decisions of all the governing bodies of the Organization (Executive Board, Health Assembly and regional committees). The portal will constitute one of the outputs of an ongoing project to implement the United Nations structured document standard Akoma Ntoso for the United Nations (AKN4UN), a variant of standard extensible markup language (XML). The fully searchable portal will contain all decisions and resolutions from 1948 onwards.

(b)   **Contact management system and guidelines:** a unified solution to replace the official list of addresses and other databases used to manage the list of Member State contacts for official correspondence and governing bodies events and to relay instructions provided by Member States on appropriate ways to reach high-level contacts. The contact management system will:

- enable the Secretariat to efficiently manage contact profiles by monitoring their status and assigning role categories for streamlined communication;

- automate contact update requests and reminders, simplifying the process for ensuring that contact information is accurate and up to date;

- assess contact/profile status, allowing data to be exported and customized to create tailored contact lists and reports;

- ensure the secure handling of confidential information and facilitate the maintenance of comprehensive contact/profile histories, incorporating tools to enhance overall efficiency;

- automatically generate instructions, as provided by Member States, on appropriate channels and recipients to reach high-level contacts.

(c)   **Official correspondence tool:** a solution to facilitate and improve the preparation and dissemination of official correspondence, including individual and mass correspondence, providing those drafting such correspondence with access to multilingual templates that are pre-filled with addresses and correct protocol salutations in compliance with correspondence guidelines.

(d)   **Member State community portal:** a tool – in the form of a password-protected website – that provides Member States with an integrated interface for interacting with the governing bodies, is interoperable with other tools under development and gives Member States easy access to information pertinent to WHO governance. The community portal will include the following functions:

- user pages, including Member State information (e.g. offices held), based on data uploaded from the contact management system;

- virtual protected workspaces for governing bodies processes, including the management of confidential information related to specific sessions (e.g. collaborative space for the authoring and editing of documents, co-sponsorship of decisions/resolutions, discussion forums, virtual platform links);

- governance announcements for Member States;

- a document repository for official correspondence (e.g. invitations to meetings and Circular Letters);

- a calendar of governing body and other relevant intergovernmental meetings;

- automated notifications to users when information is added or updated.

6.   Event registration and speaker management fall outside of the scope of this project plan; the Secretariat is currently using a tailored version of Indico to meet event registration requirements for the governing bodies. Until a fully-fledged meeting management system becomes available, this remains the best tactical solution. In 2024, the Secretariat will be working to implement a new corporate tool for event registration, as part of a broader event management project, which is expected to go live in 2025. Once implemented, the new corporate tool should be able to meet event management requirements for the governing bodies and be interoperable with the digital tools in the scope of this project.

OBJECTIVES

7.   The overarching objective of the project is to achieve a unified approach to Member States' access to information and services relating to the governing bodies and other formal interactions with the WHO Secretariat, through the development and application of modern IT tools, to enhance efficiency, transparency, and consistency. Specific objectives include: (a) improving access to WHO decisions and resolutions through the use of an online database; (b) replacing obsolete tools with advanced digital solutions to ensure efficient contact management and provide essential guidelines at the corporate level; (c) developing a tool to facilitate the preparation and dissemination of official correspondence and mass mail-outs; and (d) creating a dedicated Member State community portal for the exchange of information.

APPROACH

8.   The overall approach will involve making use of the WHO Project Management Framework – IT Variant, based on the standard WHO Project Management Framework, which encompasses WHO policies and processes relevant to managing projects with an IT component, including cybersecurity assessments. It will be managed by a skilled, experienced business analyst/project manager in the Department of Information Management and Technology, working closely with the IT focal point and relevant business owners in the Department of Governing Bodies. The project management framework

will cover all the specific and unique IT solutions needed to oversee the complete life cycle of an IT project. It will apply Agile project management methodology, using an iterative model with repeating steps or "iterations", responding to change and producing deliverables at the end of each iteration. This approach is necessary as not all components will receive funding at the same time, as described below.

STAKEHOLDERS AND ROLES

9.   Key stakeholders include business owners within the Department of Governing Bodies (overall project oversight), the Department of Information Management and Technology (business analysis and project management), the Office of the Legal Counsel (legal guidance) and WHO regional offices (regional perspectives to ensure alignment). During the development process, feedback will also be solicited, as required, from other important internal and external stakeholders, including Member States and Member regional coordinators.

SCHEDULE AND TIMELINE

10.   The following table provides a summary of the various components, their status and the expected date of completion.

Project component	Status	Expected completion
Searchable online database of WHO resolutions and decisions	Under development.	End of 2024
Contact management system	Business case approved. Under development.	2024–2025 TBC
Official correspondence tool	Business case submitted. No funding allocated as yet.	TBC
Member State community portal	Business case submitted. No funding allocated as yet.	TBC

RESOURCE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

11.   Following a successful application for funding in 2021, the full cost of the searchable online database of WHO resolutions and decisions, amounting to US$ 487 900, is being covered by the WHO Global IT Fund. The total cost of implementing the remaining three components of the digital transformation is estimated at US$ 1 925 000. In 2023, an application was submitted to the Fund for a total of US$ 1 925 000 to cover the cost of those components. In August 2023, the Secretariat was informed that only US$ 400 000 of funding would be approved by the WHO Global IT Fund in the first instance, leaving a gap of US$ 1 525 000.

12.   Given the need to prioritize, the Secretariat plans to use the US$ 400 000 of available funding to develop the Member State contact management system to replace the official list of addresses and other ad hoc contact management tools, which are obsolete and subject to frequent system failures. This core system is indispensable to the work of the entire WHO Secretariat and provides the cornerstone for any other tools developed in the future. Having the new contact management system will also enable other essential components of the project (i.e. the preparation and automated dispatch of official communication/correspondence to Member States and the Member State community portal) to function optimally. The estimated recurring biennial costs for the four components of the digital transformation are listed in the Table below.

Table. Governing bodies digital transformation: estimated recurring biennial costs for the four components

Recurring costs breakdown (biennial amount)	Amount in US$	Business unit shouldering the cost
Licences/subscription	440 424	Corporate
Hosting and storage	50 000	GBS
Maintenance and support	254 490	GBS
Human resources	580 099	GBS
Total	**1 325 013**	

RISK MANAGEMENT

13.   Risks include technical challenges linked to system integration, stakeholder resistance to changes in processes, data security vulnerabilities, lack of resources (human resources and funding), and varying levels of digital literacy among end users from the Secretariat and from Member States. Risks will be evaluated based on probability, potential impact and required mitigation measures. Mitigation plans will be discussed with stakeholders, implemented, and tracked. Regular discussions with stakeholders will facilitate informed decision-making and ensure a proactive approach to tackling risks.

14.   The main risk is that it will not be possible to deliver the capacity and funding required to complete components 3 and 4 in a timely manner, as these tools are critical to the daily work of the Secretariat and the effective governance of the Organization. Significant inefficiencies are likely to stem from the separation of contact management and official correspondence at the design stage, owing to a lack of adequate funding. The correspondence guidelines are an integral element of the official list of addresses and will need to be integrated into the future contact management tool to ensure that official correspondence can continue to be sent. It is not optimal to design the tool for the correspondence guidelines separately from the official correspondence tool.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

15.   Moving from obsolete systems to advanced digital solutions requires a comprehensive change management strategy. Users from the Secretariat and the Member States will participate in training sessions to enhance their knowledge, minimize resistance and encourage them to buy in to the digital transformation. Communication in support of change management will include targeted messaging, user-centred training materials and the transparent sharing of information through multiple channels, including via the regional coordinators. Change will be implemented in phases, with training/orientation opportunities to accompany each phase. The impact of the changes implemented will be monitored through user feedback and there will be regular improvement initiatives.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

16.   Member States will be kept informed via their regional coordinators, emails from the Secretariat and information sessions, as required. The timely sharing of progress, challenges and milestones with all stakeholders will ensure transparency.

CONCLUSION

17.   The digital transformation is set to redefine cooperation between the Secretariat and Member States by tackling long-standing inefficiencies and facilitating improved communication and engagement through the use of modern IT tools. It has the potential to revolutionize the Secretariat's interaction with Member States, contributing to more effective global health governance. The project is based on a coherent approach, using a range of complementary tools. Currently, however, it remains largely unfunded; without appropriate funding, it will not be possible to implement certain critical components.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

18.   The Board is invited to note the report and provide guidance on the following issues:

- Are the scope and deliverables of the project aligned with expectations?

- Are there any other potential risks or challenges that should be addressed in the plan?

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