

Note for the Record

Meeting of the Director-General with the Officers of the Executive Board 31 March 2021

Participants

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General
Dr Harsh Vardhan (India) Chair of the Executive Board
Dr Ahmed Mohammed Al Saidi (Oman) Vice-Chair
Dr Patrick Amoth (Kenya) Vice-Chair
Mr Björn Kümme (Germany) Vice-Chair
Dr Amelia Afuha'amango Tu'ipulotu (Tonga) Rapporteur

Observers

Mr Luis Erick Gudiel Pineda (Guatemala) Regional Coordinator for the Region of the Americas
Ms Cathrine Dammen (Norway) Regional Coordinator for the European Region
Ms Meutia Hasan (Indonesia) Regional Coordinator for the South-East Asia Region
Mr Jose Acacio (Australia) Regional Coordinator for the Western Pacific Region

Secretariat

Ms Jane Ellison, Executive Director, External Relations and Governance
Dr Catharina Boehme, Chef de Cabinet
Dr Timothy Armstrong, Director, Governing Bodies (GBS)
Mr Nicolas Ashforth, Senior Editor, GBS
Ms Denise Cipriott, Documentation Officer, Governance, GBS
Ms Patricia Durand-Stimpson, Protocol Assistant, GBS
Ms Egle Granziera, Senior Legal Officer, Office of the Legal Counsel
Mr Jude Osei, Head of Unit, Protocol, GBS
Ms Gina Vea, Head of Unit, Governance, GBS
Ms Laurence Vercammen, Protocol Assistant, GBS
Mr Derek Walton, Legal Counsel

PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

1. The Officers of the Executive Board met virtually with the Director-General on 31 March 2021, using video conference technology. The following were unable to attend: the fourth Vice-Chair, Dr Frank Anthony (Guyana); the Regional Coordinator for the African Region, Mr Firmin N'Gbeng-Mokoue (Central African Republic); and the Regional Coordinator for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Mr Farhad Mamdouhi (Iran). In accordance with Rule 8 of the Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board, the meeting would review the existing draft Provisional agenda of the 149th session of the Board, to be held in May 2021, in order to prepare the Provisional agenda. The Officers would also be invited to consider a proposal to organize a retreat for Executive Board members.
2. Welcoming the Officers, the Director-General noted that the agendas of meetings of the governing bodies were growing in size and complexity. Since 2015, the number of items on which the Secretariat had to report had grown from 157 to 229. He asked that the Officers bear this in mind when considering proposals to add items to the agenda of the forthcoming Board. With regard to the proposed retreat, he would welcome the Officers' comments, in line with the request made by the Executive Board at its 148th session in January 2021. In that regard, decisions needed to be taken on whether participation in the retreat would be physical or virtual, and on the topics to be discussed.

3. In his opening comments, the Chair of the Executive Board presented his proposed method of work, which would include seeking the comments of the Regional Coordinators on the proposal to organize a retreat for Executive Board members. The Officers agreed to the method of work. At the proposal of the Chair, the Officers also agreed to discuss together items 2 and 3, namely: the draft Provisional agenda and the proposals to add items to that agenda.

PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE 149TH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

4. The Secretariat noted that the May session of the Executive Board – which, on this occasion would last a single day – generally focussed on administrative, management and governance matters; moreover, the items already on draft Provisional agenda for the Executive Board’s 149th session was likely to take a full day to discuss.

5. The Chair explained that six proposals for new agenda items had been received from Member States. However, two of the proposals were incomplete, as they did not contain an explanatory memorandum as required by Rule 9 of the Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board, and a third had been received after the deadline of 24 March. He proposed that the Officers should not discuss proposals that were either incomplete or late, but rather consider individually the three proposals submitted in line with the Rules of Procedure. He further proposed that in considering each of the three proposals the Officers choose one of five options, recommending that the proposals be: (1) accepted onto the agenda; (2) combined with another agenda item; (3) deferred to a future session; (4) referred to another governing body; or (5) not accepted.

6. In support of the process, the Secretariat had circulated the template that was requested by the 144th session of the Executive Board, which invited the Officers to consider several elements, including whether the proposed items addressed a global public health issue, a new subject within the scope of WHO, or an issue that represents a significant public health burden.

7. The template also asked the Officers, in formulating their recommendations, to take into consideration the following elements: the last time the proposed item had been considered by the governing bodies; any work performed currently by WHO in relation to the proposed item; and the existence of reporting requirements in relation to the proposed item.

8. Agreeing to proceed in that manner, the Officers considered the following **proposals**:

- two additional items had been proposed that the Secretariat had suggested could be taken up together, namely: – “Global Health for Peace Initiative” and “The Coalition for Universal Health Protection Architecture Initiative”, both proposed by the Government of Oman. During the discussions, the Officers recognized the importance and urgency of the first proposal, which involved using health as a bridge for peace in conflict-affected countries; however, they were conscious that the agenda of the one-day May session of the Board was already very full. They also expressed the view that in trying to consider a technical matter at a meeting that was traditionally devoted to non-technical issues, the May Board would run the risk of not doing justice to such an important subject. The Officers **recommended** that consideration of the two items should be **deferred** to the **150th session of the Executive Board**, with the first to be presented as a standalone item and the second to be integrated into current reporting concerning preparedness and response in respect of public health emergencies.
- in respect of the proposed additional item on “Hosted Partnership on Digital Health”, proposed by the Government of India, the Officers heard from the Legal Counsel that the policy on WHO’s engagement with global health partnerships and hosting arrangements, endorsed by the Health Assembly in 2010 through resolution WHA63.10, included a process that was embodied in a “decision tree” that needed to be followed in order for a partnership proposal to be considered by the Executive Board. Under the process, it was for the Director-General, rather than Member States, to submit partnership proposals to the Executive Board for its

consideration. On that basis, it was premature for the Executive Board to consider the current proposal. Although they considered that the initiative in question was promising, the Officers recognized the importance of following established processes for due diligence and **recommended** that the proposed item **not be accepted onto the Provisional agenda of the Executive Board's 149th session**. The Director-General undertook to initiate discussions with the Government of India and other interested parties for further consideration. In that context, it would be important to explore whether viable options existed other than a hosted partnership.

9. There were, therefore, no changes to be made to the Provisional agenda of the 149th session of the Executive Board.

PROPOSED RETREAT FOR EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

10. The Chair of the Executive Board called for views on the idea of holding such a retreat, the issues it should consider and when it should be held. In a discussion during which Regional Coordinators were invited to participate in an informal capacity, there was agreement on the importance of organizing a retreat, with speakers underlining their impatience to be able to meet physically.

Rationale

11. Speakers pointed to the important improvement that a retreat could bring to the functioning of the Executive Board. It could lead to an improved understanding of the role of the Board, improved participation of individual members and enhanced interaction between members, which would encourage candid engagement between the Executive Board and the Secretariat and an improved flow of information.

Location

12. The Officers expressed their gratitude for an offer that the retreat be held in Oman, although speakers indicated that this option might not be feasible in the immediate future.

Timing

13. There was support both for holding a short, half-day retreat before the May session of the Executive Board and for organizing a longer, more substantive meeting after June.

Format

14. There was general understanding that a retreat held before May would inevitably have to be virtual.

Participation

15. As the Executive Board's current membership would be changed at the Executive Board's session in May, it was suggested that a retreat held before May could be used to set the process in motion. Limiting such a retreat to Board members made sense as the aim was to improve mutual understanding rather than to take decisions. Other speakers stressed that retreats should be both inclusive and transparent. A number of options for encouraging inclusiveness were proposed, namely: including Board members whose term had recently ended; organizing sessions at the beginning and end of the retreat that would be open to wider participation; and holding summary/special sessions for non-Board members. Reference was also made to the importance of clear management and follow-up of any outcome of the retreat and ways for reporting back to the Executive Board.

Proposed way forward

16. The Director-General then outlined a proposed way forward. If held before May, the retreat should be virtual, limited to a maximum of one day and proposed for Board members only in order to ensure rich, candid discussion. The retreat should consider how to improve the effectiveness of the Executive Board during emergencies, as a more active Board lay at the heart of better collaboration between the Secretariat and the governing bodies. It was not for the retreat to take decisions, but rather to make recommendations. The retreat could also consider the idea of a “rotating Executive Board”, each session of which would be hosted by a different Board member. Such an initiative would support improved mutual understanding and interaction among members.

17. Supporting the idea of virtual retreat before the May session of the Executive Board, the Chair invited the Secretariat to elaborate the details of a practical way forward, adapted to circumstances.

NEXT STEPS

18. The Secretariat indicated that following the current meeting a Note for the Record would be prepared and circulated to the Officers for their comments. The Provisional agenda would also be circulated to all Member States, following any adjustments required in respect of the outcome of the present meeting, together with the invitation to attend the 149th session of the Executive Board and the annotated Provisional agenda of that session.

CLOSURE OF THE MEETING

19. The Officers were invited to make their closing comments. The Rapporteur, speaking as a Board member, expressed the thanks of the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga to the Director-General for his strong stance on equitable distribution of scarce resources to the small island developing States. Thanks were also due to the donor partners supporting the COVAX Facility, which had now enabled vaccines against coronavirus disease (COVID-19) to be distributed to three island States. The Director-General thanked the Officers and the Chair of the Executive Board for their work in what had been a productive teleconference; the Chair then closed the meeting.

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