

19.2 WHO Reform

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In focus

Governance

Further to the Board's request in decision [EB146\(21\) \(2020\)](#), the Director-General will submit recommendations drawn up after informal consultations with Member States on governance reform, held on 26 November 2020 and 8 December 2020. Member States considered establishing end dates for reporting on resolutions and decisions that have unspecified reporting requirements, and consolidating and managing reporting requirements on similar subjects. The Board will be invited to note the report ([EB148/33](#)) and consider a draft decision.

World health days

In response to comments made during the deliberations of Committee B of the Seventy-third World Health Assembly (resumed), the Director-General will submit a report ([EB148/34](#)) in order to enable the Board to discuss the subject of world health days in the context of WHO reform.

Involvement of non-State actors in WHO's governing bodies

In February 2020 the Executive Board at its 146th session, noted the proposals for improving involvement of non-State actors in WHO governing bodies, and requested the Secretariat to submit a revised version of the report to the Board at its 148th session. This report ([EB148/35](#)) responds to that request, and in particular provides further information and proposals for the informal meeting between non-State actors, WHO technical units and Member States. The Board is invited to note the report and decide if the proposed new approach to non-State actor involvement and the informal meeting should be tested at the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly.

Background

Governance reform (agenda control)

Document and results of informal consultations with Member States on governance reform, held on 26 November 2020 and 8 December 2020 not yet available.

World health days

Document not yet available

Involvement of non-State actors in WHO's governing bodies

[EB148/35](#) refers to the EB146 request to the Secretariat to come up with a proposal for providing incentives for non-State actors to deliver a limited number of constituency statements in governing body meetings. See [EB146/33](#) and debate during [meeting 14](#) and Chair Summary ([here](#)).

The more relevant and concrete proposal is to implement an online pilot for an “informal meeting” (they avoid using the term “forum”) for interested non-State actors in official relations, Member States, representatives of WHO regional and country offices and the Secretariat ahead of the next World Health Assembly in May 2021, “to enable more in-depth technical exchanges, as well as discussions on Health Assembly agenda items” - see paras 10-15 of [EB148/35](#).

“In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and based on the lessons learned from virtual meetings, an informal meeting for interested non-State actors in official relations, Member States, representatives of WHO regional and country offices and the Secretariat could be organized, in addition to non-State actors’ regular participation in the WHO governing body meetings. This meeting could be trialled virtually during the two to four weeks prior to the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly”.

[Previous discussions of WHO Reform](#)

PHM Comment (Draft, work in progress)

Governance reform (agenda control)

It is noteworthy that what is called her “governance reform” are mainly minor managerial matters of better agenda control. The same counts for the eternal debate and revision of proposals related to “Involvement of non-State actors in WHO's governing bodies” (see below).

These managerial reforms do not addressing the deeper crisis of the WHO governing bodies and the calls for a thorough reform raised by EB members during and after the EB Special Session in October, with strong statements of concern, such as the following:

“Is the Executive Board of the World Health Organization an active governing body, or is it just a ceremonial one that only expresses gratitude towards the work we are doing? I personally want to see us here as an active executive board, one which is guiding us through the pandemic crises, through finding solutions and strategies in this most challenging public health crisis in

terms of socioeconomic effects.” (Clemens Auer, Austria, WHO EB member, calling for a Board retreat in 2021)

“When I follow the EB, I hear a lot of speeches prepared from their capitals, a lot of time wasted, one day and a half maybe, hearing ourselves, and there is not much interaction really pointing out the topics that we should be discussing. When we got into the Covid pandemic, there was a lot of questioning about how multilateral institutions were working, solving the problems and the needs of the citizens. We need to get these institutions closer to the people. We need to explain the things we do to society.” (Frank Tressler Zamorano, Chile, WHO EB member)

More information on the need for a thorough reform of the WHO EB can be found in the [outline of a session on “What reform agenda for the WHO Executive Board?”](#) organized by Medicus Mundi International as part of a [series of civil society meetings ahead of EB148](#).

We agree with the analysis of the session organizers:

“The WHO Executive Board needs to reclaim its executive role in WHO governance and take the lead in the process of a thorough reform of WHO governing bodies beyond some procedural aspects that will be discussed once more at EB148. We do not want to see the governing bodies of the WHO just being a waste of time, but a place where transformation is initiated and shaped, and where global health leadership takes place”.

World health days

Reference not yet available

Involvement of non-State actors in WHO’s governing bodies

This is the latest chapter of a lengthy debate and series of related Secretariat proposals to “better” involve non-State actors in the main WHO governing bodies, the EB and World Health Assembly. See, for an overview, the civil society paper [“Towards a more meaningful engagement of WHO with civil society”](#) published in May 2019

One year ago, PHM provided an [extensive comment](#) on the matter related to [EB146](#). Our analysis is still valid and does not need to be repeated here in detail.

Some of our concerns refer to the notion of “non-State actors” based on the WHO Framework of Engagement with non-State actors FENSA (see [EB148 item 19.5](#)), providing both civil society and private sector the same opportunity to engage in WHO governing bodies. Other concerns relate to the shrinking space of civil society in WHO governance, as expressed in Secretariat proposals to reduce the size of delegations and the number of statements.

We [concluded](#): “We urge the Secretariat to propose a way forward that is oriented towards nurturing the richness of content provided by organizations representative of grassroots movements, and is more critical towards the role of private interests that are finding their way to WHO discussions and operations. Instead of offering solutions that would effectively limit the contributions of civil society, we urge the Secretariat to undertake a comprehensive review (including detailed case studies) of its approach to civil society engagement including the potential benefits of nurturing rather than restricting such engagements.”

One year later, in document [EB148/35](#), there is not much remaining from the initial poisonous package, just a general proposal for “providing incentives for non-State actors to deliver a limited number of constituency statements in governing body meetings”; and a more elaborated project for “facilitating enhanced technical exchanges through informal meetings between Member States, non-State actors and the Secretariat”: An online pilot of a series of “informal meetings” open to interested non-State actors in official relations, Member States, representatives of WHO regional and country offices and the Secretariat shall be launched ahead of the next World Health Assembly in May 2021.

In times of Covid-19, and with a new spirit of openness of the WHO leadership to substantially engage with civil society (see [series of dialogue meetings in 2020](#)), this proposal for a(nother) informal dialogue meeting on technical matters and items on the agenda of the World Health Assembly deserves our attention.

The devil might be in the detail (again: how to deal with having such an informal meeting with “non-State actors” and not civil society, meaning that it will be open for both civil society and the private sector; why only invite organizations in official relations with WHO and not open the meetings to a broader civil society, etc.), and its implementation needs to be carefully watched and critically commented.

We nevertheless recommend to civil society colleagues not to bluntly reject this proposal, but to engage, with the necessary caution.

Notes of discussion