



Governing Body

343rd Session, Geneva, November 2021

Institutional Section

INS

Date: 21 October 2021

Original: English

Third item on the agenda

Matters arising out of the work of the 109th Session (2021) of the International Labour Conference

Analysis of the measures taken to promote the effective
functioning of the Conference

Purpose of the document

This document reviews the arrangements implemented at the first part of the 109th Session of the Conference in June 2021 with a view to drawing lessons that could contribute to further improving the functioning of the Conference in future sessions (see draft decision in paragraph 55).

Relevant strategic objective: All.

Main relevant outcome: Enabling outcome B: Effective and efficient governance of the Organization.

Policy implications: Smooth and efficient functioning of Conference sessions.

Legal implications: No immediate implications.

Financial implications: No immediate implications.

Follow-up action required: Elaboration and submission of proposals to the 344th Session (March 2022) of the Governing Body regarding the programme of work and working arrangements for the 110th Session of the Conference (2022).

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Related documents: [GB.341/INS/3/2](#) and [GB.341/INS/3/2\(Add.1\)](#).

► Contents

	Page
Introduction.....	5
I. Preparatory processes.....	5
A. Nomination of Officers.....	5
B. Group meetings	6
C. Accreditation.....	6
D. Registration in committees	6
II. Attendance	7
Security and connectivity.....	8
III. Programme of work and conduct of debates	8
A. Plenary.....	8
Early opening of the Conference	8
Discussion of the reports of the Director-General and the Chairperson of the Governing Body	9
World of Work Summit.....	9
Adoption of committee reports	9
B. Committees.....	9
Standing committees	9
Technical committees.....	10
C. Time management	11
D. Votes and Governing Body elections	11
IV. Outreach and communication.....	13
Draft decision	14

▶ Introduction

1. Originally scheduled to be held from 25 May to 5 June 2020, the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference was deferred to 2021 owing to the restrictions to meetings and travel resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. At its 340th Session (October–November 2020), the Governing Body decided to maintain all the items it had previously placed on the agenda of the 109th Session with the adjustments resulting from merging two annual sessions,¹ and requested the Office to prepare proposals on arrangements for the session of the Conference for consideration at its 341st Session (March 2021).
2. Taking into account that restrictions concerning meetings and travel made it impossible to hold the Conference session under regular conditions, at its 341st Session (March 2021) the Governing Body decided that the session would be held virtually and endorsed a number of special arrangements and procedures specific to its virtual format² prepared by the tripartite Screening Group. The special arrangements and procedures were approved by correspondence³ two weeks before the beginning of the opening of the session.
3. Despite the exceptional circumstances in which the first part of the 109th Session was held, the Conference managed to deal with all of the items on its agenda. The negotiation of outcome texts through virtual means proved challenging, but did not prevent the Conference from completing its programme of work and adopting an urgent resolution concerning the situation in Myanmar.
4. This document reviews the arrangements implemented during the first part of the 109th Session of the Conference in June 2021. While no adjustment to the special arrangements and procedures seems to be required for the resumed part of the 109th Session, several lessons can be drawn from the experience of the virtual format that could prove useful in considering further improvements in the functioning of the next and future sessions of the Conference.

▶ I. Preparatory processes

A. Nomination of Officers

5. With very few exceptions, the Officers of the Conference and of its committees and working parties were identified well in advance and permitted the start of preparatory meetings and consultations with sufficient notice. Experience gained from widespread teleworking practices and participation in remote meetings helped to establish more effective communication with and between the Officers than in previous sessions. As in recent years, efforts to make these nominations as early as possible should continue so that all Officers of the Conference and its committees can adequately prepare to carry out their duties as effectively and efficiently as possible.

¹ For details, see the [Governing Body's decision of 22 October 2020](#).

² Governing Body [decision of 27 March 2021](#).

³ Governing Body [decision of 13 May 2021](#) and [ILC.109/D.1](#).

6. The physical presence of most Officers in Geneva was considered crucial for the proper conduct of business and should be retained to the extent possible in the conduct of any future virtual meeting.

B. Group meetings

7. Equally crucial to the effective operation of the Conference session was the possibility for groups to hold preparatory meetings well before the start of the Conference and its committees. Extending such practice to future in-person sessions of the Conference would allow committees to start their substantive work as of the first day of the session, thereby contributing to reducing the need for extended sittings (in the case of standard-setting committees) or by providing additional time to the drafting groups (in the case of general and recurrent discussion committees).

C. Accreditation

8. The extremely short time between the opening of the online accreditation system and the deadline for submission of credentials did not pose unsurmountable difficulties to Member States or the secretariat, in view of the fact that delegations did not have to make travel arrangements including the securing of Swiss visas to attend the session. The use of the system was successfully extended to intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations invited to attend the session as observers. The designation of focal points to communicate with national and observer delegations was particularly useful. The Office therefore intends to continue enhancing the system, in particular to facilitate its use for the submission of modifications to initial credentials.
9. The provision of an individual email address for each Conference participant was required not only to ensure secured access to the proceedings through the web-conferencing platform, but also to transmit personal codes required for electronic votes, the submission of amendments and accessing the ILO Events App. Having an individual email address for every participant facilitated interaction and contact with each Conference participant and between participants. It is therefore proposed to retain the provision of an individual email address as one of the data required in respect of each person accredited to the Conference, regardless of the format of the session.

D. Registration in committees

10. Early registration in committees was essential in a virtual context where participation in the work of technical committees and the Committee on the Application of Standards was only possible through individual invitations. The requirement that governments register their representatives in committees was a departure from the recent simplification whereby it sufficed for governments to indicate their membership in a committee, without providing the name of the individual delegate or adviser who would represent it in the committee. To ensure that persons using electronic tools in committees (such as electronic voting or online submission of amendments) are entitled to do so on behalf of the government they represent, the requirement to register in committees individually should be reintroduced. This could be examined in the framework of the revised Standing Orders.
11. This requirement, however, generated difficulties in the Committee on the Application of Standards, in particular for countries on the list of cases for discussion, as ministers and other high-level officials, who are not accredited as delegates or advisers, are not

mentioned in the Standing Orders among the categories of Conference participants entitled to address committees.

▶ II. Attendance

12. All Conference proceedings were conducted through a web-conferencing platform. The only participants present at the Conference venue in the ILO headquarters building were the Officers of the Conference and of most committees, the Employers' and Workers' groups' secretariats and regional coordinators. Their presence at the venue was perceived as highly beneficial for the effective functioning of the Conference and should be maintained to the extent possible in future meetings held by virtual means.
13. The virtual format of the session allowed for the highest number of Member States ever recorded to participate in the Conference: 181 out of 187, with the most significant improvement observed in the participation rate of delegations from Caribbean and Pacific Island States.⁴
14. The total number of accredited delegates was lower than in previous sessions: 4,467 compared to 7,661 in 2019 and 6,438 in 2018. However, taking into account that according to the special arrangements for the session, accreditation was only open to individuals who play an institutional role at the Conference,⁵ the number is higher than in previous sessions: for instance at the 2019 (Centenary) session, the total accredited delegates with an institutional role was 3,312 and in 2018, it was 3,276.⁶
15. In contrast, the average number of delegates who attended plenary and committee sittings, as shown in table 1 below, was noticeably low: only 37 per cent of accredited delegates were connected on average to any of the plenary or committee sittings scheduled each day.

▶ **Table 1. Average number of attendees per day**

	Plenary	Committees					Total
		Application of Standards	Recurrent Discussion	COVID Response	Finance	Selection	
Accredited participants	390	265	224	198	169	100	1 177
Observers (parallel web-conferencing platform)		201	154	122			477
Total	390	466	378	320	169	100	1 654

16. Considering that the proportion of active participants at the last in-person session of the Conference in 2019 also represented less than 50 per cent of registered delegates, the Governing Body might wish to recommend limiting the accreditation to persons with an institutional role also at physical sessions through a suspension of the Conference Standing Orders on a trial basis. Other persons from national or observer delegations

⁴ See the last report on the subject submitted to the Governing Body (GB.331/LILS/1), para. 9.

⁵ See ILC.109/D.1, paras 7 and 8.

⁶ GB.337/INS/3/3, table 1.

wishing to attend the Conference could follow the proceedings remotely, or be given access on request as visitors sponsored by national constituents. This may prove particularly useful in the light of past difficulties with room capacity at the Conference venue at the Palais des Nations and the ILO building, especially during the renovation works that will be undertaken in the next few years.

17. A combined approach of physical presence and remote participation would allow members of national delegations whose participation in the plenary or in committees is limited to punctual interventions or to a specific sitting of a committee – for example the participation of a minister, employer or worker leader in the plenary or the intervention of a Government representative in the Committee on the Application of Standards solely for the discussion of a country case – to decide whether to travel or not. It also offers the additional advantage of allowing third parties who, under normal circumstances do not attend the Conference, to follow the proceedings. Enabling access by the academic community, for example, could contribute to increased outreach and visibility. Such hybrid format would however entail a challenge to those following the proceedings remotely from other time zones.

Security and connectivity

18. The individual email addresses provided by delegates when submitting their credentials were used to send the invitations with embedded links allowing them to connect to the meetings for which they were registered. The fact that every delegate received different emails, each containing a link for one meeting, generated confusion and led to constant requests to resend the invitations.
19. In response to the comments from constituents concerning the lack of clarity in the web-conferencing invitations, the Office is working on improving them for the resumed part of the session in November–December 2021. Making web-conferencing links available on the website or through the app would not allow for secure, private and individual access to the platform and proceedings. Hence, sending individual links only to accredited participants is a practice that will have to be maintained.
20. Regarding security and connectivity, no major issues were brought to the attention of the Office apart from a few cases of connectivity problems due to limited bandwidth in the delegate's location. The systematic testing of connectivity with key speakers at the World of Work Summit or the Committee on the Application of Standards was extremely useful and will be pursued in future virtual meetings. Additionally, to prevent connectivity issues from disrupting the conduct of the debates, delegates registered to speak in plenary will be encouraged to connect at least 30 minutes before their estimated time slot.

▶ III. Programme of work and conduct of debates

A. Plenary

Early opening of the Conference

21. Advancing the formal opening of the Conference to 20 May, more than a week before the start of committee proceedings, allowed for preparatory work ahead of the start of

the committees, thereby reducing the time assigned to opening formalities in each committee and making possible an earlier start of substantive work.

22. To benefit from these advantages in future, consideration could be given to splitting the formal, procedural opening of the Conference from the more substantive and ceremonial opening of the Conference with the interventions from the Director-General, the Chairperson of the Governing Body, the President of the Conference and the groups' spokespersons. The Office is prepared to make proposals in this regard that could result in one additional substantive sitting for committees.

Discussion of the reports of the Director-General and the Chairperson of the Governing Body

23. The number of speakers remained reasonably high, at 268 delegates, compared with 317 in 2019 (Centenary session), 305 in 2018, 295 in 2017, and 294 in 2016.
24. Within the time limit of four minutes (for both pre-recorded and live statements) delegates delivered substantive statements with key messages. It is therefore proposed to maintain this time limit in future sessions of the Conference.
25. The use of video statements allowed speakers from different time zones to deliver their interventions according to their availability or preference. The combination of recorded and live modalities provided the secretariat with the flexibility to play pre-recorded statements when connection problems with live interventions occurred, hence making maximum use of the time available.
26. Consideration could be given in this regard to the possibility of allowing pre-recorded video speeches in future sessions of the Conference, thereby enabling contributions from government, employers and trade union leaders who may prefer not to travel to Geneva only for the purpose of delivering a plenary statement.

World of Work Summit

27. As in previous years, the World of Work Summit consisted of a high-level section with the participation of dignitaries and Heads of State or Government and a tripartite panel discussion. In response to previous requests from constituents for more interactivity, the Office introduced the use of a chat box in the web-conferencing platform for posing questions to the panellists. This contributed to a more dynamic conversation and broader engagement of the audience.
28. Building on this experience and that of previous sessions, the Office will ensure earlier consultations in the future, allowing for timely preparation of the panel discussion and the selection of high-level panellists.

Adoption of committee reports

29. The 90 minutes allotted for the discussion and adoption of Committee reports was sufficient thanks to the strict adherence to the time limits set for interventions. It is proposed to carry on with this practice in future sessions of the Conference.

B. Committees

Standing committees

30. The **Credentials Committee** held five sittings with the Chairperson present in the meeting room and the Employer and Worker members connected via the web-

conferencing platform. This format did not significantly affect the fluidity of exchange among members and the Committee effectively managed its workload. The number of objections received, 6, was very low in comparison with previous sessions: 12 in 2019; 27 in 2018; 29 in 2017. The Committee received no complaints, as due to the virtual format there was reduced scope for complaints concerning non-payment of travel and subsistence expenses of delegates and advisers.

31. The brief report on credentials presented by the Chairperson of the Governing Body was replaced by [information regularly updated](#) on the Conference website, including the quorum required at any point in time for the validity of votes at the Conference. At this session, the quorum was based on all accredited delegates and not only those registered as present, as no additional registration was required under the virtual format.
32. The **Finance Committee** was able to consider all the items on its particularly heavy agenda,⁷ which included the Programme and Budget proposals for 2022–23, in two sittings, instead of the three initially foreseen.
33. The **Selection Committee** managed to deal with the three items referred to it by the Conference in the single sitting that had been scheduled on 2 June:
 - the consolidated text of the amended Standing Orders of the International Labour Conference;
 - the proposed abrogation and withdrawal of international labour instruments placed under item VII of the Conference agenda; and
 - the draft resolution on the principle of equality among ILO Member States and fair representation of all regions in the ILO's tripartite governance.
34. The Committee was reconvened from 15 to 17 June to consider the draft resolution concerning Myanmar. To do so, the Committee used the same online tool for amendments as the technical committees and the system to display the text under discussion in the three official languages. Committee members and the secretariat were able to adapt efficiently to this change in the programme in spite of the difficulty of discussing a politically sensitive text in a virtual setting with limited time.
35. The series of informal tripartite consultations on the adjustments in the working methods of the **Committee on the Application of Standards** to be conducted in virtual format resulted in smooth and productive work of the Committee. The increased use of written information supplied by governments contributed to efficient time management in the conditions of reduced number of sittings. The creation of a dedicated committee mailbox streamlined and centralized the communication, allowing for fluid exchange and quick reactions that should be retained in future sessions. Last but not least, the early adoption of the list of cases was greatly facilitated by the preparatory virtual group meetings conducted ahead of the start of the Committee's work.

Technical committees

36. The special arrangements put in place for the two technical committees (COVID Response and Recurrent Discussion on Social Security) provided an appropriate framework for the conduct of their work in such exceptional circumstances. The online amendment tool that had been introduced in 2019 was particularly useful in a virtual

⁷ ILC.109/CF/D.1(Rev.2).

setting and some of the adjustments implemented in the amendments validation process could be retained for future sessions.

37. Technical committees were the most affected by the virtual format of the session, in particular in terms of the reduced time at their disposal, as explained in paragraph 41 below.
38. As was the case for the plenary, the presence of the Officers and groups' secretariats in the Conference venue was key to the smooth conduct of the sittings.

C. Time management

39. One of the main constraints imposed by the virtual format was the need to limit the working hours in order to enable the participation of delegates from different time zones. The maximum working hours per day for live discussions was three, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Central European Summer Time (CEST), excluding Sundays. In that context, efficient time management was critical for successfully completing the Conference's programme of work.
40. In plenary, the total time devoted to speeches was 22 hours and 30 minutes (eight three-hour sittings). Thanks to the successful implementation of the measures mentioned in paragraphs 24 and 25 above, the sitting originally foreseen for Saturday 12 June did not prove necessary.
41. Technical committees had to resort to extended sittings to complete their work, which obliged delegates from some regions to work well beyond regular working hours. This was also the case for the Selection Committee when it considered the draft resolution on Myanmar. While this confirms that the time required by committees devoted to negotiating texts cannot be reduced further than in 2019 in normal (in-person) sessions,⁸ the Office is exploring, in consultation with constituents, what adjustments can be made to the programme and methods of work to ensure that the two working parties meeting in November–December 2021 can fulfil their mandate within the agreed working hours.
42. Displaying the list of speakers and allotted speaking times during plenary sittings and the general debate segment of technical committees contributed not only to efficient time management, but also allowed delegates to see the sequence of speakers and facilitated the smooth flow of interventions. The Office intends to continue the practice in future sessions.

D. Votes and Governing Body elections

43. Under the special arrangements and rules of procedure, the use of electronic voting was not only foreseen for votes in plenary and Governing Body elections, as was the case in previous sessions of the Conference, but also for possible votes in committees in view of the constraints imposed by virtual participation.
44. Thirty record votes were held electronically for the adoption of the Programme and Budget for 2022–23 and for the withdrawal or abrogation of 29 Conventions and Recommendations. The three electoral colleges elected the Governing Body members for the 2021–24 term through nine secret ballots. All these votes were taken using the

⁸ GB.337/INS/3/3, paras 56 to 58.

web-based system already tested in 2018 and 2019. No votes proved necessary in any of the committees during the first part of the Conference.

- 45. While no lesson can be drawn from the use of electronic voting in committees, experience with the Governing Body elections and votes in plenary shows that the system is fully effective and reliable from a technical and operational point of view. Difficulties faced were related to the complexity of voting and participation rules, which required extensive information sessions and numerous exchanges with delegates.
- 46. Governing Body elections required around one and a half hours in each of the Employer and Worker electoral colleges. The election process in the Government electoral college required two meetings, totalling a little more than two hours. This is comparable to the time required in the past to conduct the elections in each college during sessions held in person.
- 47. In contrast, significant time-efficiency gains were achieved with the votes carried out in plenary (programme and budget and withdrawal or abrogation of standards) for two reasons. First, all 30 ballots were included in a single vote, and second, the vote was conducted in parallel to other business of the Conference over a longer period. The vote opened during the plenary sitting on Thursday 17 June and closed at the plenary sitting on Saturday 19 June. This provided sufficient time for all delegates to cast their ballots regardless of their time zone and for the Office to furnish assistance while the plenary could use the limited time available to carry on with its other business.
- 48. As shown in table 2, the participation rate in votes was relatively low, especially in the employers' and workers' electoral colleges. This is consistent with the low participation rate mentioned in table 1 and paragraph 15 above.

► **Table 2. Participation in the votes on the Programme and Budget for 2022-23 and the abrogation or withdrawal of 29 instruments**

		Maximum potential voting delegates	Votes actually cast	Percentage of voting delegates
		645	375	58.1
Governments	Regular members	300	230	76.6
	Deputy members		225	75.0
	Deputy members (second round)		147	49.0
Employers	Regular members	159	80	50.3
	Deputy members		75	47.1
Workers	Regular members	158	77	48.7
	Deputy members		72	45.5

- 49. There seems to be good reason to continue with the practice of combining into a single grouped vote all or most of the ballots required in plenary and to organize them in parallel to other plenary business over two or more sittings.
- 50. Based on the request from constituents in relation to secret ballots, the Office has programmed the electronic voting system so as to be able to identify the delegates having taken part in the ballot while preserving the secret nature of their votes. This proved particularly useful in ascertaining which ballots had reached quorum and mobilizing other delegates in cases where a delegation had not used all its voting strength.

▶ IV. Outreach and communication

- 51.** Building on lessons learned during the past 18 months, the Department of Communications and Public Information implemented a communication strategy for the Conference making the most of new technology and online platforms to bring the first virtual session to ILO priority audiences, working in coordination with regional and country offices. The following products were introduced or updated to make the most of online innovations:
- A purpose built livestream player and page to host the daily plenary broadcast, in English, French and Spanish, and make available indexed recorded video footage. The live page registered 117,601 unique page views (not including those participating via the web-conferencing platform). This represents an almost 3.5 times increase on the number of unique page views compared to 2019, when the live coverage page registered 35,553 unique page views.
 - A new live blog, produced separately in English, French and Spanish, with distinct content, providing a rolling update on the Conference and the issues under discussion. From 6 to 20 June, the blogs had 7,955 page views. The average time users spent on the pages was nearly five minutes. This represents almost five times the average time users spent on the Conference live web page.
 - The Daily Show returned for 2021 in a transformed, digital format, using new technologies to broadcast from a virtual studio and link up with live guests in different locations. It registered 5,051 unique page views – a 10 per cent increase on the equivalent measure in 2019. The Daily Show was also re-streamed live on the main ILO social media channels and registered a total of 39,606 video views, over 15,000 of which were on LinkedIn alone.
 - The new ILO Voices platform was used to tell the human story of the issues under discussion, from the perspective of the actors of the world of work. From 6 to 20 June, the platform had 8,771 page views and the average time users spent on the pages was three minutes. This represents almost three times the average time users spent on the live page.
- 52.** Owing to the virtual format of the session, there was no need to issue printed copies of the Conference guide and all the information was made available in the clearest possible way on the Conference website and through the ILO Events App. Every effort was made to enhance the user-friendliness of the website and delegates have expressed particular appreciation for the committees' pages, but there is still room for improvement in other sections of the website.
- 53.** Based on the feedback received, the Office will continue improving the website and find alternative methods for communicating this information for the second part of the 109th Session, as a priority, as well as for future sessions.
- 54.** Lastly, the experience with the virtual format of the Conference seems to confirm that the conditions to move to a full paperless Conference are already met, as all information is readily available and accessible electronically and all participants are equipped with the hardware necessary to access it.

► Draft decision

55. The Governing Body requested the Office to prepare for its consideration at its 344th Session (March 2022) a detailed programme of work for the 110th Session of the International Labour Conference (2022) taking into account the written comments received on document GB.343/INS/3/3(Rev.1).