

Orientation Session for members of the Executive Board

Intervention by
Ms Vera El Khoury Lacoeuilhe, EXB Chairperson

29 January 2024

Dear Colleagues,

Functions

Being a member of the Executive Board is an honour and a privilege, but most of all it is a big responsibility that entails many obligations and a lot of work. Before giving all the information that we have prepared for you, I would like to start by setting the constitutional context.

According to the Constitution, the Executive Board shall exercise the powers delegated to it by the General Conference on behalf of the General Conference as a whole.

As Board members we of course represent our government, but we are all bound by the UNESCO constitution and should not lose sight of the fact that we sit on behalf of the General Conference.

UNESCO is an intergovernmental organization financed by Member States. Between two sessions of the General Conference, the Executive Board is the decision-making body in this organization. The Secretariat makes proposals, and the Executive Board decides, and in some cases recommends to the General Conference. The Secretariat is accountable to the Executive Board and of course to the General Conference.

The Executive Board has many statutory functions derived primarily from the Constitution and then from rules, regulations, directives and resolutions adopted by the General Conference, and agreements with the United Nations, specialized agencies and other intergovernmental Organizations.

I will not list now all the functions of the Executive Board for the sake of time but I will mention some of the most important ones.

As stated in the Constitution (article VB6) the Board examines the programme and corresponding budget submitted to it by the Director General and then submits it to the General Conference with its own recommendations, in a document known as the C/6.

According to the Constitution, the Executive Board, acting under the authority of the General Conference, shall be responsible for the execution of the programme and budget adopted by the General Conference.

In accordance with the resolutions of the General Conference and having regard to circumstances arising between two ordinary sessions, the Executive Board shall take all necessary measures to ensure the effective and rational execution of the programme by the Director-General.

The above two functions are among the most important ones and require Board members to give them high priority in terms of preparation and time allocation.

The Board exercises many duties under the financial regulations, including the examination of the External Auditor's reports and financial statements.

The Board approves formal arrangements with specialized intergovernmental organizations and agencies.

It convenes Intergovernmental conferences in accordance with the regulations for the General Classification of the various categories of meetings organized by UNESCO. (reference: "Basic Texts")

The Board makes recommendations to the General Conference regarding the elaboration and adoption of International Standard Setting Instruments. (reference: "Basic Texts")

Another essential function of the Executive Board concerns the preparation of the General Conference. It establishes the provisional and the revised agenda, and it examines the organization of the session.

This is a big responsibility that should be taken very seriously. It is the duty of the Board to make sure that the General Conference is organized under the best conditions and that its agenda includes all the major items, reforms, strategies, strategies and statutory issues, for its consideration as the supreme body of the Organization.

The Executive Board recommends the venue of the General Conference.

It also recommends nominations for the post of President and Vice-Presidents of the General Conference, as well as Presidents of the Commissions and committees.

It also recommends to the General Conference the admission of new members to the organization.

The Executive Board nominates a candidate for the post of Director-General to the General Conference.

Preparing for the Executive Board

Preparing for the Executive Board should be looked at as a “two years cycle” and not as 2 sessions per year. The preparation is continuous. I would humbly advise that you do not wait until a few weeks before the session to start.

The work that can be done between two sessions of the Executive Board is essential for your preparation. You already know most of the items on the agenda so you can start collecting information, investigating, consulting other members or reaching out to the Secretariat. Take the time to seek advice and to identify and understand the different positions on issues.

There are many different sources of information to help you prepare starting with the information meetings organized by the Secretariat, regional group meetings, working groups, informal meetings between delegates and many other opportunities.

I think that those of you who have been here long enough know that the biggest mistake one can make is to stay in one’s office and work in isolation. You will learn more from other colleagues than from any document. Similarly, you will get more information in the corridors than in formal meetings.

Reach out and do not limit yourself to your regional group. You will achieve nothing on your own in the Executive Board.

The Golden Rule: Please read the documents. The Secretariat puts huge efforts in producing some of them, and the comments of Member States on their work matter.

I advise that for each item you read the previous decisions to understand fully what the Board has requested and to make sure that the reporting covers the implementation of the full decision.

The summary records of previous sessions are also a huge source of information because it is important to know the history and background of some important recurrent items.

As soon as you sit through your first Board session you will understand the importance of the Rules of Procedure (reference Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board”) in every single step of the work. I would advise you to keep a copy of the Staff Rules and Regulations, as well as a copy of the financial regulations within reach at all times.

Before I give the floor to the Director of GBS, I would like to make one more remark that concerns the FA commission.

I will forever be grateful for former Ambassador Sybil Campbell from Jamaica who, when I arrived to UNESCO many years ago, said to me:

“If you really want to grasp and fully understand the way this complex organization works start by following the FA commission. Once you understand the subjects discussed in the FA Commission, the rest becomes very easily.”

Many years later I am still thankful for this advice and I would like to reiterate it. Don't be afraid of the FA - the items can look dry but they are essential for the understanding of the organization. Moreover, this is where staff issues are discussed and nothing is more important than our staff. They are our number one asset.

The Bureau

I would like to give you some additional information about the Bureau of the Executive Board, which meets at the beginning and during the formal Board sessions.

However, the Chairperson of the Board can call for additional Bureau meetings if and when she or he deems it necessary.

The Vice-Chairs of the Executive Board are Member States, and it is for each of these elected Member States to decide who will represent it in the Bureau.

If the representative to the Board is not available, an alternate can replace him or her.

This is not the case for the Chairpersons of commissions and committees, which are elected in their personal capacity and if absent at the time of a Bureau meeting, they cannot ask anyone to replace them.

However, the commissions and committees elect a temporary Chair to replace the Chairperson in chairing the meeting, if necessary.

The Vice-Chairpersons' role in the Bureau is to represent their groups. They are the link between the Chairperson of the Executive Board and the electoral groups. They have to keep the members of their group duly informed, consult them and inform the EXB Chairperson of the position or positions of each group. Therefore, they do not speak in their national capacity in the Bureau.

The Bureau does not take decisions. It is not a mini Executive Board. It makes recommendations to the plenary where the decisions are taken.

Draft Decisions

Dear Colleagues,

Please remember that what is not in the decision is not implemented by the Secretariat. You might ask the secretariat to do things in the course of the debate. If you want these things to be carried out, you must include them in the decisions.

When you want the Secretariat to report back to the Board, do not forget to include this in the DR. Try not to over burden some sessions of the Board and take into consideration reasonable deadline for the Secretariat to be able to report.

Board Members are allowed to present amendments during the debate of a decision, but it is recommended to be prepared in advance and to undertake informal consultations on amendments or draft decisions before the beginning of the Executive Board.

We will provide technical assistance and facilitate such consultations before and during the sessions.

I would also recommend that you reach out to the secretariat for additional information or to seek explanations regarding their proposals. In many cases in the past, such exchanges clarified things for us, the Board members, and sometimes made us change our mind about amending decisions or presenting new proposals. In other cases, we did not agree with the secretariat, and we tabled our proposals.

Once DRs or amendments are tabled, negotiations should take place exclusively between Member States. The secretariat is not to interfere in these negotiations or try in any way to influence the Board's decision-making.

I would like to also state that amending the draft decisions presented by the secretariat does not mean that we are against the Secretariat or that we do not trust the Secretariat. We are simply doing our job. It is our right to amend the draft decisions to reflect the interests of Member States in an intergovernmental organization.

There are organizations where the secretariat does not propose any draft decisions in documents. There are designated penholders among Member States whose role is to produce the draft to be negotiated.

In UNESCO it is the Executive Board that has requested the secretariat to propose drafts decisions in documents to facilitate discussions.

These drafts were never meant to become the final products. They are there to be amended if you deem it necessary.

The C6 and its Drafting Group

I intend to include them in the calendar of the relevant session to avoid the loss of institutional memory. Every few years there are attempts to sweep the issue of the C6 and the process for producing it under the carpet despite its importance.

It is also high time we put it in writing somewhere that the Executive Board has the right to amend volumes one and two of the C5. In fact, the Executive Board has the right to rewrite all of it if it so wishes. I am not encouraging you at all to do this, but I would like to make sure that you know all your prerogatives.

Restriction on appointment to the Secretariat

Before I conclude, I would like to mention an important rule of the Rules of Procedures (rule 65) that stipulates that representatives and alternates appointed by Members of the Board (Member States) may not enter into a contractual relationship with the Secretariat until **18 months** have elapsed from the date of cessation of their representative functions.

This means that Representatives and Alternates cannot accept any kind of payment from the Secretariat; a post in the Secretariat, a consultancy contract, or even travel expenses to attend a meeting unless it falls under Rule 61.

This rule was adopted by the Executive Board to protect and preserve the Board from any risk of conflict of interest.

To conclude, I hope that you found this session useful. We are considering the possibility of holding another session before the October session of the Board, focusing on the preparation of the C5. We will keep you informed and, in the meantime, the GBS team and myself are at your full disposal to answer any additional questions you might have.

Thank you.