03

▶ Institutional response to the pandemic

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NAVIGATING THE CRISIS

KEY POINTS

▶ The ILO had recent experience dealing with global natural, economic and health emergencies, but the scale and nature of COVID-19 were something new. None of the existing risk management and business continuity plans and procedures offered a roadmap that ILO management could use to navigate this pandemic.

▶ ILO management responded well to the uncertainty and unpredictable change brought by the crisis. Its crisis-management approach demonstrated agility, flexibility and a willingness to continuously adapt.

▶ Organizational leadership was key, especially in its willingness to make quick decisions when not all relevant information was available.

Well before 11 March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), the ILO was considering and preparing for its potential impact. Recent experience with other health crises had placed it on alert. The H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic of 2009, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus outbreak (MERS-CoV) of 2012, the Western African Ebola virus epidemic of 2013–2014, and the avian influenza epidemic in the People's Republic of China of 2013–2019 had all affected the ILO's work to varying degrees. Some regional offices, such as the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, had fresh memories of these crises and had begun to work with ILO HQ as this new threat emerged in the region.

Despite this alertness to the impending crisis, none of the policies, plans and procedures that were in place at the onset of the pandemic could fully prepare the Organization for the global scale and impact of COVID-19. The ILO's risk-management framework and policy[15] considered the onset of a pandemic as a background threat in its strategic risk register. Country Office Business Continuity Plans had also been in place since 2014 which were designed "to ensure effective crisis decision-making of its senior management" and "uninterrupted continuation of ILO critical operations".[16] But none of these provided a roadmap that ILO management could use to navigate COVID-19 – it was different from anything anyone envisaged. Uncertainty and confusion were everywhere, and there was no checklist that could be used that would make things any clearer. The situation demanded agility, flexibility and a willingness to continuously assess the situation and adapt. As a 2021 report from the ILO's Risk Office concluded, in such situations "crisis management is more important that Business Continuity Planning."[17] Staff and constituents surveyed in the HLE agreed that the ILO was not well prepared for the crisis (see paras. 214 and 220). Development cooperation evaluations corroborate this finding at country level.

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15. https://intranet.ilo.org/en-us/trcf/Pages/risk-management.aspx (accessible to ILO staff only)
16. Director-General's announcement, IGDS Number 321 (Version 1), 15 March 2013.
17. Anthony Barrow, *Business continuity in the field – lessons learnt from COVID-19*, 2021, 1.

The ILO was quick to recognize the need for such a crisis management response. From late February 2020, when the first signs appeared of what was to come, senior managers reviewed existing risk and business continuity documents and decided that they were not especially helpful – as one put it "it became apparent the old play books were not relevant". An existing Crisis Management Team (CMT) led by the senior managers in HQ was re-convened and met every day at 09:00 for two years from the first day of the pandemic. The CMT was initially chaired by the Deputy Director-General, Management and Reform (DDG/MR), but the Director General (DG) soon chaired it himself, leading the development of the institutional and policy response at the highest level.

An expanded Global Management Team (GMT) was also mobilized to help devise, coordinate and communicate the ILO's institutional and policy response. It acted as a conduit for information on the pandemic's uneven impacts in the field and on emerging regional and national priorities. These included maintaining connectivity with constituents during lockdown, ensuring staff welfare, engaging with UN partners, and supporting field operations. The membership of the GMT – normally comprising the DG, the three DDGs, the Director of the International Training Centre (ITCILO) in Turin, and the five regional directors – was expanded to include other key HQ executives with major roles in implementing the ILO's response (for example, the Treasurer and Financial Comptroller, Directors of HRD and PROGRAM). The GMT met every week and was an important mechanism in keeping the Organization unified to make decisions, communicate, and to adapt to a changing world. Connection at a country level was also strengthened, for example, through a series of five discussions between HQ senior managers with Country Directors in October 2020. As one senior manager said, "it was so important to draw the strands of the Office together, to hear from the field and to identify the global priorities". Without constant communication with the regions, another said, "there were real concerns that the organization would fragment."

The operating environment of these management teams was one of constant uncertainty. Nobody knew at the time how long the crisis would last and when "business as usual" could resume. Business continuity plans are generally predicated on the assumption that, after a crisis hit, things would return to normal in a relatively short time. Those interviewed for the HLE said that nobody dreamt the situation would last for over two years and that dealing with its unpredictable twists and turns would become a constant challenge.

Management processes and procedures that were in place prior to the pandemic and which were designed for well understood, stable and predictable contexts were now less relevant. Senior management chose to manage things in a new, less comfortable and riskier way. A true adaptive management[18] approach was required. It was one that accommodated continuous adjustments based on the best available information gathered from the field, data analysis and a willingness to re-evaluate and adjust decisions as things became clearer. Such agility demands quick decisions, something not often associated with the ILO's cautious and highly consultative processes. To the surprise of many people interviewed, the ILO proved it was up to the challenge of working in this way – as one senior manager put it, "the ILO was uncharacteristically agile". The extent to which ILO might retain this agility post-pandemic is an important consideration for the future.

Many decisions had to be made to ensure the Organization could continue its work – including office closures (HQ was closed on 16 March in advance of local government directives), information technology investments (a rapid upgrade was needed to enable internal operations and work with constituents and to enhance IT security), and HR matters (see **3.3.2**). Maintaining clear communications was also a priority and the ILO's approach during the pandemic was highlighted as good practice in the UN Joint Inspection Unit's report on business continuity across the UN system: "an office-wide internal communications campaign intended to bring staff together virtually and in the new hybrid work environment (One ILO connect) was conducted, which engaged office-wide various stakeholders and helped bridge the gap between headquarters and the field".[19]

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18. "Adaptive management refers to an approach to managing under conditions of ongoing uncertainty which represents a paradigm shift from classic, linear approaches to planning, implementation and evaluation. This approach to using information is needed when it is not possible to gather sufficient information at the planning stage to be able to make detailed plans. It involves deliberately taking actions in order to learn and adapt as needed under conditions of ongoing uncertainty." See: Better Evaluation, "Adaptive Management", nd.

19. "UN Joint Inspection Unit, Business continuity management in United Nations system organizations" ((JIU/REP/2021/6) , 84.

At an operational level, once ILO management at HQ and the field had set in place this organizational framework, it was able to maintain its work despite the many continuing challenges. As one ILO manager put it, "we managed to muddle through". Some developments in the ILO that occurred just prior to the pandemic also aided operational continuity, such as finalizing the field offices' migration to the Oracle system used by HQ (previously two different systems had been in place, and this may have complicated operational planning and management during the pandemic). The very nature of ILO's work also helped to some extent, as much of this work is knowledge-based it was less prone to disruption than, say, the work of development organizations involved in direct humanitarian relief work.[20]

The country case studies highlighted a range of experiences and views on the management responsiveness of the ILO at the country level.

▶ Over the period of the pandemic, the **CO for Argentina** had a change of Directors and its experienced programme officer retired. Nevertheless, it was one of the first countries to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. It published a series of technical notes on the effects of the pandemic on the labour market, platform work, domestic work and female health workers (this one in partnership with UNWOMEN and UNFPA), all in 2020. The CO provided inputs for the preparation of the UN Office of the Resident Coordinator's document "Multidimensional Impact of the Pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Argentina", has been in permanent contact with the constituents' organizations to provide information on the documents, ILO and other UN agencies' data and guidelines, and shared information on the measures that other countries in the region were taking to deal with the effects of the pandemic. There was close contact with the Programming Unit in the Regional Office, but the unprecedented demands slowed down some regional and HQ responses to the country's needs.

▶ **Iraq** faced unique challenges, most of which were outside the ILO's control. The Country Office's establishment phase and the approval of its DWCP coincided with the onset of the pandemic, compounding its already challenging operating environment requiring security restrictions on staff movement (including the need for armed vehicles) and office accommodation issues. Despite these obstacles, the ILO established a US$35 million programme portfolio in two years. Online platforms facilitated communication and collaboration with the Regional Office, HQ, and consultants based in Jordan and Lebanon, enhancing access to technical guidance on project proposals.

▶ **Mexico** experienced different disruptions with office relocation coinciding with crisis and turnover at the country director level (one leaving just as the pandemic hit and another five months later). Nevertheless, the DWCP in Mexico offered the conditions for the creation of a Tripartite Board, which met virtually in March 2020 to learn the actions of the tripartite actors in response to the pandemic, and to take further actions to protect workers, jobs, and income. ILO supported the development of a new project to reactivate the economy and employment post-pandemic with the emphasis on just transition. It produced OSH guides and protocols to the agriculture sector, rural workers and domestic workers. Knowledge produced by the CO on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable groups created an early warning and supported the action being taken by the constituents.

▶ The **CO for South Africa** also has a DWT, supporting other countries in East and Southern Africa. The management processes established at this level reflected the model described for HQ – frequent meetings and communication focusing initially on staff safety and business continuity, and on maintaining dialogue with constituents (including equipping employers' and workers' organizations with technology to enable this, as well as communication with their members). The office said it worked closely with HQ, with knowledge products such as the ILO Monitor establishing the authority of the ILO with stakeholders.

20. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, "Outline: The Impact of COVID-19 on Humanitarian Access", 2021.

▶ In four countries in the **Western Balkans**, while constituents valued ILO's policy responses (for example, its rapid assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on labour markets, its policy advocacy, the help it gave to governments to act better and faster, OSH and working from home guidelines), the ILO's responsiveness to the crisis was seen to have been adversely affected by its relatively small presence at the country level compared with UNDP, UNICEF and other organizations, administrative inefficiencies (procedures were described as a "blast from the past"), and insufficient human resources to help all countries at the same time resulting in some National Coordinators receiving more timely assistance than others. Administrative procedures were widely reported to have held up country initiatives.

▶ In **Indonesia**, employers observed that ILO was very adaptable during the initial crisis phase, playing an important role in facilitating COVID-19 vaccination in workplaces and in emphasizing OSH to prevent sickness spreading through work contacts. However, they also noted that these actions reduced the attention being given to the original DWCP, which was still a priority to them. Workers' organizations noted that ILO invested in training on conducting online meetings and training, which was very useful to improve their activities during the pandemic and which built new capacity for unionists. In the palm oil sector, unions particularly appreciated ILO's work on strengthening bipartite (workers' and employers' organizations) social dialogue and agreements on specific issues, such as OSH and child labour. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners, who played an important role in COVID-19 response activities, reported rapid support from ILO in terms of technical advice for new or modified activities, but slow administrative and financial procedures.

▶ In **Viet Nam**, the CO experienced an unsettled period at senior management level from May 2021, when the Country Director moved to another position, until April 2022 when the current Country Director took up the post. This coincided with the peak of the pandemic in the country, but despite the challenges, the office was able to contribute to the COVID-19 response across its programme. The ILO provided rapid assistance to the government's General Statistics Office to apply the ILO's latest statistical tools enabling quarterly updates of the impact of the pandemic on the labour market. Staff reflected on the fact that the CO had maintained an evidence-based strategy rather than rushing into initiatives. The CO had also maintained its focus on staff wellbeing and did not seek additional COVID-19 projects to add to an already extensive portfolio, but rather adapted its existing programme. UN partner representatives observed that the ILO contributed effectively to the joint UN plan the COVID-19 response, as well as COVID-19 adjustment to the joint UNDP-ILO social protection strategy. Representatives of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour found the ILO's response prompt and relevant in supporting COVID-19 risk assessment tools and implementation.

Organizational leadership was an important element of this agile management response – the situation called for quick decisions to be made, often with significant information gaps. Some senior managers interviewed said that there were calls from some to slow things down in the hope that things would become clearer, which were resisted. One department director indicated that without this willingness to make hard decisions that went beyond trying to maintain "business as usual" the ILO would have "been stuck".

The HLE's survey of staff provided additional insights on perceptions of the ILO's institutional readiness and response. On a ten-point scale, with 10 being "very well prepared" and 0 being "not at all prepared" to manage the uncertainty and unpredictable changes of the early stages of the pandemic, the average score was 5.62. While communication was ranked by many staff among the top three successes of the ILO's response, it also ranked highly among the three key shortcomings by many staff.

GOVERNANCE DURING THE CRISIS

KEY POINTS

▶ ILO governance systems were challenged in unprecedented ways, demanding speed, adaptability and new virtual processes while preserving social dialogue.

▶ In the early stages of the crisis, when the Organization needed quickly to set a direction for the global policy response, the usual governance processes were circumvented to some extent. The initial "four pillar" strategic framework was set by ILO management without explicit constituent endorsement although it did align closely with the Centenary Declaration and the 2020–21 P&B. In this sense, ILO management recontextualized the ILO's existing endorsed policy direction rather than changed it.

▶ Despite some reservations about the loss of opportunities for human interaction and one-to-one discussions and debate due to virtualization of governance systems, constituents were satisfied that the ILO's response was appropriate in the circumstances and that its actions showed that it remained strongly committed to social dialogue and consultation throughout the crisis.

COVID-19 also required agility and flexibility from the ILO's governance structures which are unique within the UN system in their application of the principles of social dialogue through both the GB and the International Labour Conference (ILC). While the governance systems of large private sector companies are usually led by relatively small boards of 12–15 directors, the ILO's are expansive – the GB has 56 titular members[21] and 66 deputy members,[22] the ILC has 748 voting members.[23] This may make the ILO's governance arrangements seem unwieldy by comparison, but they embody the social dialogue and tripartite approach which it promotes.

COVID-19 challenged these governance systems in unprecedented ways, demanding speed, adaptability and new processes while preserving social dialogue. Travel and meeting restrictions meant that the 338th and 339th Sessions of the GB had to be cancelled and, as an interim measure, the GB ran a series of 17 virtual meetings which involved Officers of the GB and members of its "tripartite screening group". Through these meetings, the screening group was briefed on the impact of the pandemic on ILO operations so that urgent and important decisions could be made, including the deferral of the June 2020 ILC.[24] Some decisions were made "by correspondence" including the decision to hold the 340th Session of the GB virtually – a first for the ILO. This virtual GB meeting required some groundwork, including the establishment of the legal basis for such a meeting and the adoption "special arrangements and rules of procedure" for its conduct. Similarly, the 109th Session of the ILC in June 2021 was conducted virtually for the first time.

Other UN agencies also had to adapt their governance systems during the pandemic, but the tripartite nature of the ILO made this challenge more complex. Despite this, the ILO adapted well compared with other UN agencies (for example, the 2021 report of the UN Joint Inspection Unit, cited above, highlighted the ILO's use of virtual meetings in its governance as good practice[25]).

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21 Governments, 14 Employers and 14 Workers.

22 Governments, 19 Employers and 19 Workers.

23 Each of the 187 Member States can have two government delegates, one employer delegate and one worker delegate. Each delegate has one vote.

24 GB.340/INS/18/6

25 UN Joint Inspection Unit (JIU/REP/2021/6), 85.

Constituents expressed various views on these governance adaptations but accepted that they were unavoidable. Some highlighted the important human contact dimension of social dialogue that was lost without physical meetings, such as informal one-to-one discussions and debate, and networking with others to exchange information and ideas freely and spontaneously. But they acknowledged that they worked well in the circumstances. A workers' organization spokesman on the Recurrent Discussion Committee on Social Security, shared his experience of participating virtually in the 2021 ILC delivered.[26]

In the early stages of the crisis, when the organization needed quickly to set a direction for the global policy response, the usual governance processes were circumvented to some extent. The development of the initial "four pillar" strategic framework (see **4.1**) was, for example, led by the Office and not explicitly endorsed by constituents, though it did align very closely with the 2020–21 P&B and followed the principles set out in the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, which was endorsed by the ILC just months before (June 2019). As a senior manager said, "this initial policy framework set the broad parameters for the ILO's response until the Global Call to Action" (see **4.1**).

Representatives of constituents acknowledged that the usual engagement processes could not be followed in these early stages. As one said, "the Office engaged, but things happened very quickly; yes, decisions were a bit more top-down than usual, but the sheer volume of work and delayed GB guidance inhibited things to some extent." Another constituent representative, while commending the ILO's work with constituents in programme implementation, believed engagement should have done more to address the existential threat faced by representative bodies in retaining and servicing members during the crisis. In the **Western Balkans**, on the other hand, some employers' organizations reported

> The challenges were considerable, and many colleagues had doubts, including myself, that this format would produce acceptable conclusions. However, it did, and we overcame the obstacles. We should not forget that all the delegations had to make significant efforts to make this happen, including working from the early hours in some regions and into the night in others.

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26   ILO, News: International Labour Conference 2021: What are the lessons from the Social Security Committee? 28 June2021.

increased interest and membership, building on analytical documents and publicity they received through collaboration with ILO. In the same region, some employers' organizations felt that ILO did not really assist them, because its limited country and subregional human resources were fully occupied in support to governments and employers.

ILO senior management stressed that maintaining social dialogue and continuing to engage with constituents remained the highest priority throughout the pandemic. Some cited the "extraordinary level of consultation with constituents" that led to the 2021 ILC's "Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient." Negotiating remotely for many months with constituents from 187 Member States involved a big investment of time and reaching agreement on the Call to Action was a major achievement. One senior manager in HQ said that the ILO received feedback that no other UN agency had given as much attention to consulting with government constituents and framing its response to meet their needs. In some cases, this involved more direct contact, for example, rather than consulting just with Geneva-based country representatives, remote consultations directly with Ministry of Labour officials became more common, along with hybrid meetings involving both Geneva-based and in-country representatives. This was said to have enhanced the two-way exchange of information and views and the relevance of ILO's responses.

New governance and management processes introduced during the pandemic that proved to be efficient and effective should be reviewed and agreement sought on which of these should be maintained in the post-pandemic world. The example was given that some less crucial GB decisions could continue to be made "by correspondence" if all parties agreed. This would allow face-to-face discussions at GB meetings to spend more time on more substantive issues.

RESOURCING THE CRISIS RESPONSE

KEY POINTS

▶ ILO quickly established procedures to enable Regular Budget and development cooperation funds to adapt to new circumstances while maintaining accountability. Despite these steps, lack of budget flexibility was sometimes reported as an obstacle to a rapid response.

▶ In terms of development cooperation funds, the ILO quickly reached out to its funding partners to brief them on the situations faced in the field and to discuss how projects might be adapted. While some projects had only limited scope to change, others were able to make significant adjustments.

▶ The ILO was also able to mobilize new voluntary contributions from development partners to respond to the emerging needs of constituents and to address the challenges of the pandemic.

▶ Human resource management played a vital role in ensuring business continuity and the ongoing delivery of the Organization's mandate. The ILO adapted quickly, establishing new systems, equipping staff to work remotely, and ensuring their workplace safety.

▶ The speed of the ILO's response in crisis situations in the field was raised as a concern. Delays in funding approvals and in recruitment of technical specialists to meet increased COVID-related demand presented difficulties in the field, only resolved in some cases by using staff assigned to development cooperation projects. ILO's inability to quickly mobilize human resources in response to crises was identified by staff and constituents as an obstacle. Some opportunities were lost due to this slow response.

Financial management in response to the pandemic

Overview of budget and expenditure in the 2020–21 biennium

The ILO's Regular Budget (RB) for 2020–21 was US$790.6 million of which US$496.6 million was earmarked for the delivery of policy outcomes.[27] Estimated extrabudgetary funding in the biennium, including voluntary contributions for development cooperation projects (XBDC) and unearmarked contributions to the Regular Budget Supplementary Account (RBSA), was US$500 million.

Actual RB expenditure in the biennium was 5 per cent under budget (US$749.8). Combined XBDC and RBSA expenditure was 33 per cent over the estimate (US$667.7 million). Expenditure was higher than estimated across all P&B policy outcomes except Outcome 6 on gender and non-discrimination. This expenditure included funds committed in the previous biennia. In the 2020–21 biennium, new approvals in the XBDC and RBSA categories reached US$672.5 million. This was a 15 per cent decrease from the record level achieved in 2018–19 but was a strong result given the fiscal strain placed on donors during the pandemic.

Flexibility and agility in adapting Regular Budget expenditure

The crisis required the ILO to make rapid adjustments to its planned expenditures. The ILO's operating environment was different, and constituents' needs, and priorities had suddenly changed. The Organization was quick to understand the need for budget flexibility to maintain relevance and introduced innovative and proactive measures to allow this. Established financial management systems were not so rigid as to prevent or delay an agile response. As one senior manager said: "The ILO budget is reasonably flexible if you know what to do."

In April 2020, just weeks after the pandemic was declared, the ILO issued a COVID-19 guidance note on the delivery of the Programme and Budget for 2020-21.[28] This aimed to ensure transparency and accountability in any adjustments made, especially within the Regular Budget. The note reaffirmed the continuing relevance of the P&B as an overarching framework for the ILO's response while enabling ILO managers and staff to deliver the P&B "with flexibility and agility, and through re-purposing of available resources":

Global deliverables set under the outputs of the Programme and Budget might have to be re-oriented or de-emphasized to the advantage of others that acquire greater relevance in view of evolving demands and circumstances. Country-specific strategies may also require revision. Adjustments in this respect will need to fit within the four interconnected pillars of the ILO framework for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as it affects the world of work. They should be reflected in the Outcome-Based Workplans (OBW) for the biennium as appropriate."

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27   ILO, ILO Programme Implementation Report 2020–21. GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1) (2022).

28   https://intranet.ilo.org/en-us/covid-19/Pages/delivery-of-P&B-2020-2021.aspx> accessed 26 May 2022. Accessible to ILO staff only

The guidance note set out the procedures on adjustments to different RB budget types, including Regular Budget "slippage", Regular Budget Technical Cooperation (RBTC),[29] Regular Budget Supplementary Account, and Programme Support Income (PSI).[30] For example, in the case of RBSA, the note explained how COVID-19 adjustments by COs needed to be:

▶ **Discussed with the tripartite constituents** involved, through ACT/EMP and ACTRAV specialists in the case of the social partners, **and the relevant Outcome Coordination Team (OCT) Leads**/technical specialists.

▶ **Consistent with the original purpose** of the approved RBSA proposal and feasible within the approved budget.

▶ **Realistic** in terms of ambition, deliverables and timelines.

By mid-2020, regular budget staff cost savings of approximately US$3.6 million had been identified which were re-directed as part of the COVID-19 response to support constituents, including the conduct of rapid assessments of the impact of the pandemic on labour markets (see **Box 2)** and OSH interventions. As set out in a report to the GB[31] in October 2020:

▶▶ **Over 70 per cent (or some USD 13.4 million) of the resources allocated from the Regular Budget Supplementary Account were applied to address COVID-19 response strategies in 31 Member States, with a focus on employment generation, social dialogue and tripartism, sustainable enterprises, protection at work and social protection.**

Further, for the first allocation round of RBSA funds launched in April 2020, the COVID-19 response became the new priority. Their overall purpose in supporting countries to achieve P&B outcomes remained unchanged but would now "aim to support ILO constituents in developing effective responses to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world of work [32]"

Similarly, the guidance note re-oriented RBTC funds to the challenges of COVID-19. By the time the pandemic hit, 75 per cent of the overall RBTC provision for the biennium had already been disbursed to HQ departments and to the field. The note freed programme managers to consult with colleagues and OCT Leads to:

▶ **Refocus (within the same CPO or GP) or re-programme (towards other CPOs or GPs)** the already disbursed RBTC allocation to support urgent services constituents may request of the ILO in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

▶ Request the immediate release of the RBTC balance for that purpose.

29 That part of the Regular Budget that is specifically earmarked for providing Technical Cooperation assistance to ILO constituents.

30 Funds derived from income earned on programme support costs charged on development cooperation projects for indirect services provided by the ILO.

31 GB.340/INS/18/6, para. 69.

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This HLE analysed the reflection of this new guidance on the CPO report database and found several inconsistencies (see Section 4.7). Following a thorough qualitative analysis, it found that 56 per cent of the CPOs reported some action in response to COVID-19. Next, it conducted an analysis of the actual expenditures associated with these actions and achievements to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and found a total of US$180.7 million. It confirmed that XBDC and RBSA were the main sources of funding contributing with over US$162 million to actions involving responses to the pandemic. Additionally, almost half of the total RBTC funds was allocated for this purpose, corresponding to over US$18.7 million. Part of these RBTC funds were tagged as COVID-19 tracking – over US$73,000. This tag refers mostly to supporting the Rapid Diagnostics for Assessing the Country Level Impact of COVID-19 on the Economy and Labour Market. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of these expenditures in relation to ILO's overall expenditure for the biennium. Importantly, since these expenditures cover multiple actions that include, but not exclusively address COVID-19 related responses, the results presented next need to be read with a note of caution. They are a proxy of the ILO's expenditures on COVID-19 responses. According to an ILO senior manager, despite efforts at HQ to accurately locate responses to the COVID-19 crisis within specific outcomes or outputs "it is difficult to say how much money went for what. Theoretically, it would be good, but not practically possible."

FIGURE 1: BREAKDOWN OF COVID-19-RELATED EXPENDITURES AT THE POLICY ACTION DIMENSION RELATIVE TO ILO'S OVERALL EXPENDITURE, 2020–21

Regionally, Africa and Asia and the Pacific reported most expenditures associated with policy actions including COVID-19 responses, over US$58 million. This correlates with the higher number of projects in these regions (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: REGIONAL BREAKDOWN OF COVID-19-RELATED EXPENDITURES RELATIVE TO ILO'S OVERALL EXPENDITURE, 2020–21
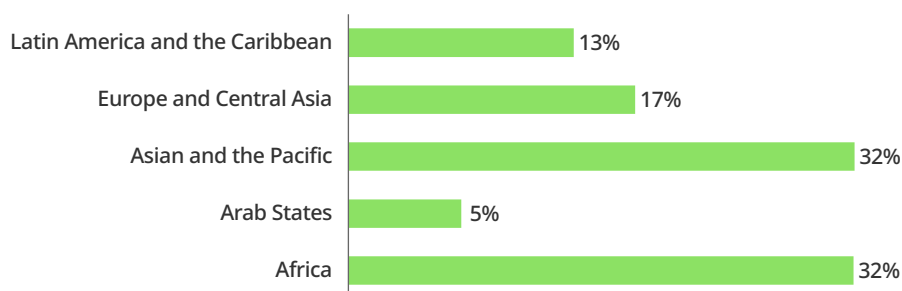
These guidelines and the processes they established were appropriate in the circumstances and allowed the budgetary flexibility needed for the ILO's actions to remain relevant while ensuring management oversight and accountability. However, the staff and constituent surveys suggested that adjusting budgets was not always straightforward with a significant percentage of respondents listing "financial agility and re-purposing of Regular Budget funds" as being among their "top three obstacles" to a timely response to COVID-19 (see Paras. 217 and 225). It should be noted that assessing compliance with these guidelines and processes was outside the scope of this evaluation.

Flexibility and agility in adapting development cooperation project expenditure

As the pandemic took hold, it soon became clear that many existing project outputs could not be delivered as planned. At a global level, through its Partnerships and Field Support Department (PARDEV), the ILO reached out to its funding partners to brief them on its actions in response to COVID-19 and on the situations faced in the field and to discuss how projects might be adapted. PARDEV said that partners were generally open to these adaptations as they understood the new challenges and trusted in the ILO as a partner. Constituents also needed to be involved in this re-purposing of development cooperation projects to ensure their changing needs and priorities were met.

At the field level, PARDEV worked to strengthen the capacity of management and staff to engage with partners, including through webinars and by staggering work hours to better advise staff working in different time zones. Guidelines on developing contingency plans for project implementation and delivery were published on the ILO website[33] as well as "Tips for COVID-19 responsive projects – Is your project fit for purpose in the current COVID-19 context".[34] These prompted project managers to assess whether projects could still adhere to established workplans and deliver planned outputs and results. Different advice was given for projects nearing completion (for example, consideration of early project closure and reaching agreement with donors on how remaining funds should be used) and projects with a longer time-horizon (for example, project suspension, adopting different intervention models to achieve similar results, or making bigger changes to address new needs).

These efforts allowed many projects to remain relevant and get results by switching to alternative delivery modes or by making other changes. A synthesis review of 41 project evaluations that were conducted during the pandemic (ILO, 2021: 7) found that projects were generally quick to adapt to their new circumstances, for example, by using remote delivery methods and by revising training content, especially regarding OSH. Often, they added new research elements that improved knowledge of the pandemic's effects and enabled further project refinements. Some were able to make more extensive changes to programme strategy and services, redefine beneficiary targets, extend their geographical coverage or develop completely new products and services. Some played a role in directly meeting infection control needs by producing personal protective equipment (PPE) as part of project implementation. One even diverted 20 per cent of its US$3.5 million budget from high-level policy and governance activities to emergency humanitarian assistance, providing food, medicine and shelter to over 1,000 stranded migrant workers.[35] This positive finding on flexibility in project implementation was reinforced in an EVAL meta-analysis of ILO decent work results in the period 2021–22, highlighting some success of the ILO strategies put in place during the pandemic to maintain results:

> ⧨⧨ **The ILO and its implementing partners showed flexibility and response capacity to allow, as far as possible, the continuity of activities despite delays and setbacks that limited the achievement of outputs and progress towards immediate objectives. Field offices were able to quickly adapt to online means of communication and in later stages, relying on the support of the ICT-ILO to move capacity development and training to online formats.**

33   https://intranet.ilo.org/en-us/covid-19/Pages/COVID-19-Guidance-Dc-project-implementation-and-delivery.aspx> accessed 26 May 2022. Accessible to ILO staff only.

34   https://intranet.ilo.org/en-us/PARDEV/Documents/TIPS%20for%20COVID-19%20responsive%20projects. pdf#search=development%20cooperation%20covid> accessed 26 May 2022. Accessible to ILO staff only.

35   ILO, "Improved labour migration governance to protect migrant workers and combat irregular migration", ETH/16/02/GBR

The third edition of the synthesis review with 46 project evaluations found that 52 per cent had implemented significant actions to respond to the impacts of the pandemic in the world of work. There is a trend in increasingly adapting and designing projects that, in addition to mitigating impacts, seek to contribute to an inclusive and sustainable recovery, with emphasis on social protection and skills development (Figure 3). This is the case mostly in Asia and the Pacific and the Americas regions, as well as in inter-regional development projects (Figure 4). Fourteen project evaluations (30 per cent of the full sample) reported relevant recovery actions, with five of them being designed specifically with this purpose. They focus on sustainable enterprises in the informal economy, employment, the livelihoods of women and vulnerable populations, and the economic integration of refugees and migrant workers.

FIGURE 3: TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE FOCUS OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PROJECTS IN MITIGATION AND RECOVERY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (N=24)
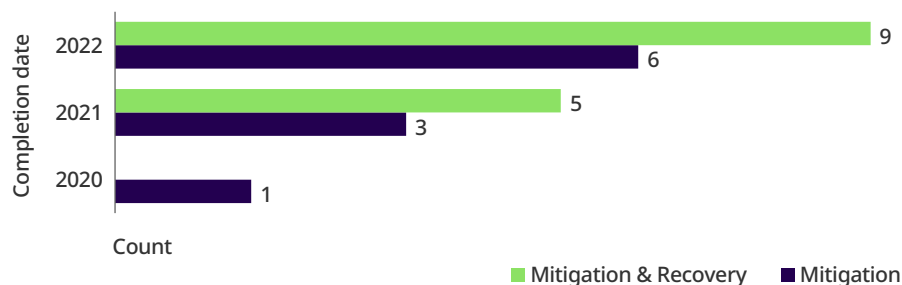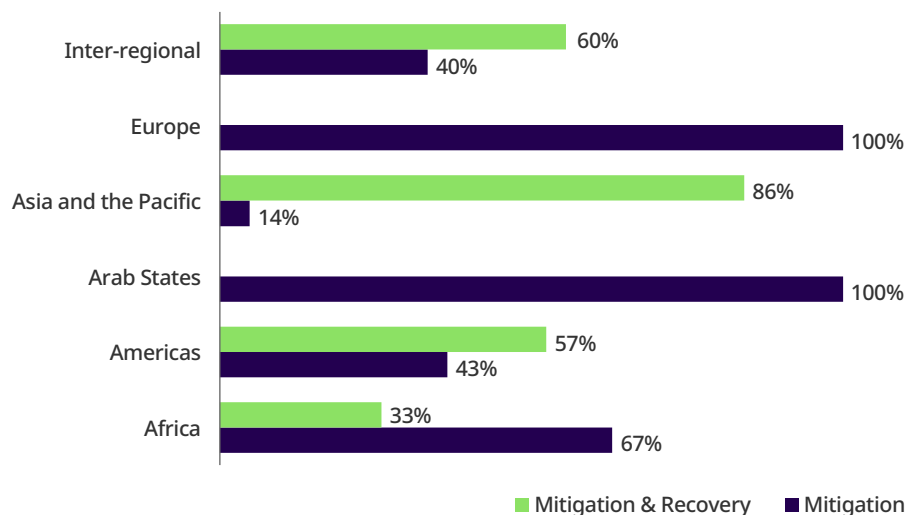

FIGURE 4: FOCUS OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PROJECTS ON MITIGATION AND RECOVERY ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, PER REGION (N=24)

Such flexibility and adaptability in development cooperation netted results and often also improved internal coherence: interventions that could make significant changes that responded to the changed landscape of the pandemic "showed that the ILO could be agile in developing highly relevant activities and resources that meet stakeholder needs, and could overcome barriers to internal collaboration to unlock latent synergies and capacity to innovate.[36]" Examples of barriers that turned into opportunities include the expansion of inclusion and collaboration between stakeholders from multiple locations through virtual meetings as part of the response to lockdown restrictions, and the re-purposing of travel restrictions savings to implement new activities to respond to COVID-19, such as the production of studies on the impacts of the pandemic and increasing the number of participants in training activities. In larger, inter-regional development projects, emerging areas of work to respond to COVID-19 worked as a catalyst to mobilize resources, for instance, by sharing the project budget between ILO units to develop global products, such as the study on the green recovery from COVID-19 in West Africa.

Mobilizing new funds for development cooperation in response to COVID

During the pandemic, the ILO was also able to mobilize new funds[37] designed to directly target the effects of the pandemic on the world of work. Again, the ILO, through PARDEV, was quick to provide guidance and practical tips on designing interventions that support constituents during the new reality of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, PARDEV distributed a note summarizing the results of its engagement with key funding partners and providing information on their humanitarian and development cooperation funding in response to the pandemic. This note also guided field offices on what local follow-up action was required to both adjust existing projects and develop new funding proposals in response to COVID-19.

There were some negative comments about the capacity of the ILO to mobilize funds quickly enough in crisis situations. In the case study country of **Argentina**, a former senior manager spoke of the office's efforts to position itself to support a national tourism recovery strategy. Argentina had received US$30 million from the World Bank through the Tourism Ministry. The ILO had no prior contact with this Ministry but there was an opportunity to work with them to address informality in value chains, sustainable business practices, enterprise resilience and support ethnic minorities. US$300,000 of RBSA funds were notionally allocated. Unfortunately, it took months to get the funding released and then more time was required for recruitment. In the end, the ILO "missed the boat" with the Tourism Ministry telling the ILO that it was too slow. As the senior manager put it: "ILO needs to invest more in its crisis response capability – immediate action gives us credibility." Similar comments were made about the speed of the ILO response in **Serbia** (see Para. **257**).

The ILO's people and the pandemic

Internal ILO workplace adaptations to the crisis are not a focus of this evaluation, but it is important to recognize that the measures taken in human resource management played a vital role in ensuring business continuity and the ongoing delivery of the Organization's mandate. The wellbeing of staff was a clear priority, and this meant that many human resources policies and procedures had to be updated or tailored to the new circumstances – including those that covered OSH, mental health and wellbeing, working conditions (for example, leave, working time, overtime), balancing work with home care and home-schooling responsibilities, recruitment and onboarding, and later, vaccinations and return to office arrangements. In terms of the ILO's OSH response, the HLE's surveys found that both staff and constituents rated this very highly (see Paras. **216** and **224**). Individual interviews were illustrative - as one informant said, "the medical service and the staff welfare service were at the service of the field offices."

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36   ILO, 2021:43

37   New voluntary contributions were mobilized totalling US$672.5 million.

Of course, the biggest human resources change was the introduction of mandatory teleworking. There was an existing teleworking policy in place prior to the pandemic which allowed teleworking to be approved for staff whose duties could be performed effectively outside the office, limited to a maximum of 50 per cent of working time in any month. In practice, teleworking had been relatively small in scale prior to COVID-19 and shifting most of a workforce of over 3,000 to telework was a challenge. It required the ILO to establish new staff support and information services, provide access to enabling technology and internet bandwidth, be flexible and understanding regarding the other pressures COVID placed on staff, ensure fairness in its implementation, and support managers and staff to get the skills they needed to work in this way (for example, how to manage staff or deliver services to constituents remotely).

Some departments said that, because of the existing policy, they were already accustomed to teleworking and were well prepared for its expansion under COVID-19, when eligibility was extended to all staff (including those on short-term and probationary contracts, interns and those engaged under development cooperation projects) and the restriction on the percentage of hours worked was removed. For many others telework was new and many had to adapt to it at a time when their workload had greatly increased.

However, because of the nature of the work they normally did, some found it was no longer possible to do their usual jobs at all – as one manager from HRD said, "some colleagues were over-worked, and some were under-worked". HRD said that efforts were made to retrain these people so that they could do other jobs and allow the ILO to more flexibly mobilize its workforce. But this was not always straightforward. HRD said that "some managers resisted sharing under-utilized support staff" – presumably because these managers were concerned there might be longer term resource implications for their unit.

As of June 2022, the ILO was gradually returning to pre-COVID teleworking arrangements, but it is safe to say that, like many organizations around the world, teleworking is now an established part of the "new normal" and many more people will seek to continue to work in this way, at least to some extent. According to the ILO Programme Implementation Report 2020–21, teleworking and other innovations enabled the ILO "to sustain high quality services and support constituents, as well as the functioning of the governing organs".[39] Staff and representatives of constituents concurred with this assessment.

The ILO needs to use the lessons learned during COVID-19 to maximize the benefits of teleworking while also reducing its negative effects. The evaluation team heard examples of both. For example, HQ specialists said that providing technical support remotely rather than through country missions, meant that this support was more continuous and less episodic but also less intensive – missions may have been infrequent but were more immersive. Remote delivery offers greater programme reach, including to beneficiaries in hard-to-reach locations and where the ILO does not have a local office. But it can also squeeze out more vulnerable, less technologically savvy participants, such as people working in the informal economy and the rural poor. On a human level, individuals working in teams benefit from face-to-face connection, especially new members who need to be immersed in team culture and develop natural mentoring relationships with people they trust. Working parents, especially women, can find the office to be a healthy escape from a teleworking environment that combines work with family responsibilities. At the same time, staff

38   https://intranet.ilo.org/apps/igds/en-us/Pages/DocumentDetails.aspx?igdsnumber=141> accessed 26 May 2022. Accessible to ILO staff only.

39   GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1) p. 78.

have become accustomed to teleworking – as one respondent in **Mexico** said: "a challenge will be to dismantle the teleworking structure to return to 'normality' - it will not be easy, workers have already got used to it."

Some other human resource management concerns were also brought into focus during the pandemic that exposed a lack of institutional responsiveness to difficulties faced in the field. One regional director, using the example of the huge increase in demand for policy advice on social protection during the pandemic, was unable to get the human resources needed through internal channels. The DWT had only one social protection specialist who was already working at full capacity and HQ was similarly over-stretched. Ultimately, due to the flexibility of project donors, funding was found within existing development cooperation budgets to supplement internal resources by contracting additional international experts. But speed in mobilizing staff in a crisis is clearly an ILO weakness, reinforced in both the staff and constituent surveys which rated **"human resource flexibility, putting staff where needed" as the biggest obstacle to a rapid response during the crisis** (see Paras. **217** and **225**). This was echoed in the EVAL meta-analysis of the decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations for 2021–22 which found that human resources were for the most part inadequate to deliver project outputs and objectives, highlighting how COVID constrained access to resources.

SUPPORTING CONSTITUENTS AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE DURING THE CRISIS

KEY POINTS

▶ With employers' organizations, the ILO's capacity building work pivoted to address the needs of employers and business membership organizations (EBMOs) including through business continuity and support tools, local survey instruments, and online training. Reported P&B results exceeded target, but constituents said more was needed to strengthen EBMOs' value proposition to members.

▶ With workers' organizations, the ILO used its network of field specialists to share global good practices in trade union responses to the pandemic and support the continuation of social dialogue during the crisis, and organized online training and webinars at global, regional, subregional and national levels. P&B targets were not met, and a "digital divide" was identified as a contributing factor. The continuing need for face-to-face engagement with workers was highlighted and this suffered during the pandemic.

▶ The ILO's work in building the capacity of labour administration and social dialogue institutions required a major re-assessment of priorities and workplans as Member States sought guidance on policy and practices in response to the crisis.

▶ The International Training Centre of the ILO (ITCILO) played a central and much expanded role in building constituent capacity to meet the many new challenges brought by the pandemic.

Overview

Learning lessons from the 2008 financial crisis,[40] ILO acted quickly to identify and address the challenges faced by constituents, using various channels including direct contacts with constituents, online meetings and workshops, feedback from field staff and DWCTs, secondary resources and surveys.

According to the *ILO Programme Implementation Report 2020–21*, the ILO initially "supported social partners to respond to the immediate health consequences of the pandemic in the workplaces, enabling them to remain functional and develop services, tools and resources for their members and the wider communities of employers and workers".[41] This was followed by policy research and advocacy related to identified needs, such as business continuity and job preservation measures, skills development, income support and social protection responses. SMEs, workers and enterprises in the informal economy, and other vulnerable groups were a focus. Support for ministries of labour to develop their crisis response policies and programmes included knowledge products and policy guides, technical advice and support for labour inspectorates.

Total expenditure in P&B Outcome 1 (Strong tripartite constituents and influential and inclusive social dialogue) during 2020–21 was reported at US$147.4 million, 68 per cent from the ILO regular budget, 29 per cent from extrabudgetary development cooperation contributions and 3 per cent from the RBSA. The evaluation's financial analysis found that the ILO's reported resources committed to the COVID-19 response either through repurposed or new projects supporting Outcome 1 reached US$14.8 million. Significant differences were noted between regions, with Asia and the Pacific having 89 per cent (US$13.2 million) of the repurposed or new COVID-19 related Outcome 1 projects.

Altogether, the ILO reported 199 results achieved under Outcome 1 during the biennium 2020–21, exceeding the target (179) by 11 per cent, although reported results against target differed between the constituent groups (see Paras. **170**, **175** and **180**).

In terms of supporting constituents to maintain services to members during the pandemic, the HLE's survey of constituents rated the ILO's work quite highly – see Para. **221** – though these results may have been skewed by a low and unequal response rate from different constituent groups.

Building institutional capacity of constituents

Employers' organizations described the challenges that they had faced at an institutional level during COVID-19 – including maintaining membership, communicating with and delivering services to members, and engaging in advocacy. When the crisis hit, ILO outcome-based work plans for building the capacity of EBMOs were revised to better reflect changing needs and priorities, but implementation was delayed in many countries due to office closures, an initial lack of teleworking capability and internet connectivity issues.

The ACT/EMP explained that its capacity-building work pivoted to address EBMOs' needs to survive and provide value to their members. A more centralized approach was used which focused on producing global COVID-19 products customizable at the country level including policy advocacy support, business continuity and support tools, local survey instruments (for example, 420 surveys were conducted in 50 Member States), and online training (for example, EBMOs in 27 Member States were reported to have scaled up virtual training). Social dialogue was supported but ACT/EMP aimed to address those policy issues that "kept the employers' organizations awake at night". ITCILO was also subcontracted to deliver online training. Examples of ILO initiatives supporting the institutional capacity of employers included:

40   See for example, the Evaluation Office's review of ILO's past response to economic and financial crises: ILO's response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers and enterprises, 2020.

41   GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1), p. 28.

▶ ACT/EMP carried out a global survey on the impact of the pandemic on EBMOs and their operations.[42] This provided a basis for reviewing future interventions in light of the likely mid- and long-term implications of the pandemic and enterprise recovery. The focus remained on new membership retention and service provision strategies, as well as on policy advocacy on business recovery and resilience.

▶ ACT/EMP developed practical tools to support EBMOs in the areas of OSH, working from home, safe return to work, other workplace issues and business continuity planning. Initially, these were developed at a global level and then customized to meet local circumstances.

▶ Templates were developed that enabled EBMOs to survey local enterprise recovery needs and assess training needs resulting from COVID-19.

▶ Webinars were held on key policy themes to enable information and knowledge-sharing between EBMOs.

▶ Guides were published for employers on COVID-19 prevention and safe return to work, and on a six-step COVID-19 business continuity plan.

▶ ACT/EMP also developed generic tools that colleagues in the field would take to the employers and adapt to the relevant legal national framework and translate.

▶ Some interactive tools were also created in which field colleagues could add local content and quotes.[43]

From the case study countries, an employers' organization representative in the **Western Balkans** said that the ILO was quick to provide them with "important documents that shed light on government and employers' organization responses to COVD-19 in regions of the world" and that this helped them prepare guides for members on such issues as OSH, telework, online payments, and the situation of different sectors. "We gave employers instructions on how to address the concerns based on the examples from the EU countries that ILO shared with us." In **Indonesia**, the ILO worked with the Indonesian Retail Merchants Association to train business owners and laid-off workers in digital skills to meet changed market needs. In **Viet Nam**, practical support was provided to ease communication challenges between the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and its members via ICT equipment and Zoom accounts.

The Programme Implementation Report on Output 1.1 of the P&B ("Increased institutional capacity of EBMOs") showed results at a country level that were more than 50 per cent above target (61 versus 40 against two output indicators) but this may not be a reliable indication of the effectiveness of the ILO's work in building constituent capacity during the crisis. Employers' representatives acknowledged this P&B result but suggested that more could have been done to strengthen their value proposition to members during the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, including through innovative membership retention strategies and by improving policy advocacy capacity. This was echoed in the annual progress report of the Outcome-based Workplan (OBW) (ILO, 2020: 10)[44] which concluded that there was much more to do in supporting EBMOs[45] capacity and improving their resilience in crises. Two ILO reports, including one prepared jointly with the International Organization of Employers (IOE), analysed the effect of the pandemic on EBMOs and on their support to businesses. These may help shape future ILO support for these organizations, such as building institutional capacity in such focus areas as the future of work, the use of digital transformation tools, the organization of remote work, crisis management and the development and delivery of innovative member services.

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42 ILO. Report of the Director-General. Sixth Supplementary Report: The response of the International Labour Office to the COVID-19 pandemic. GB.340/INS/18/6 (2020).

43 GB.340/INS/18/6

44 This report summarizes the conclusions of the 3rd OBW review of the 2020–21 biennium, a stocktaking meeting organized by PROGRAM with Outcome Coordination Team leads and field directors, and the semi-annual progress report by outcome.

45 ILO and IOE, A global survey of employer and business membership organizations: Inside impacts and responses to COVID-19, 2020; and ILO, Leading business in times of Covid crisis. Analysis of the activities of employer and business membership organizations in the COVID-19 pandemic and what comes next, 2021.

Workers' organizations also faced huge challenges. The ability of trade unions to communicate with members was severely disrupted. As one representative said, "We never envisaged a need to move to online contact – the developing world was not ready for this. Everything had been based on physical meetings and it became difficult to contact them." A senior ILO manager in South America said, "constituents were paralysed and not digitally equipped." Disruption was also worsened as union leaders themselves fell ill with COVID-19. Workers' representatives said that it took over three months to re-establish links and this had "a severe impact on our ability to represent workers and to influence what the ILO was producing." Planned capacity development activities were adjusted, and the focus shifted to supporting workers to stay safe (for example, by developing short videos that trade unions could distribute).

The ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) used its extensive network of field specialists to gather information from the field and to share global good practice responses to the pandemic by employers' organizations. It connected with workers' organizations across the globe to collect and disseminate national trade union responses to the pandemic, including with regard to social dialogue processes, government measures and violation of workers' rights –focusing on the most vulnerable (for example, migrant workers, front-line health workers and informal economy workers). Building social dialogue capacity was crucial and ACTRAV indicated that they reinforced the message that, in engaging with the other social partners, "whatever was done should be done via social dialogue". In the process, workers' representatives were urged not to surrender gains made through collective bargaining as these were designed to protect workers at the highest level. DIALOGUE issued a *Policy Brief* [46] on October 2020 analysing the use of "peak-level social dialogue" during the "initial phase" (15 March–10 June 2020) of the pandemic. The brief presented observations on policy issues and possible avenues for constituents. It informed DIALOGUE's work going forward, including on the need to advocate for social dialogue measures that specifically target workers and business units in the informal or undeclared economy, migrant workers, freelancers and self-employed.

Other examples of ILO initiatives supporting institutional capacity of workers' organizations include:

▶ A video staging site (established by June 2020) through which guidance could be given to trade unions on social dialogue and on ways to assist the most affected workers including women, youth and people with disability.

▶ Enhanced ILO support to unions to enable them to influence policies and revitalize social dialogue (for example, by promoting trade union alliances within each country, fostering bipartite dialogue with EBMOs and increasing the capacity to participate in national and UN planning processes to implement the 2030 Agenda (supported by a training package on the role of trade unions in multilateralism[47]).

▶ For the first time, the biennial ITCILO Academy on Social Dialogue and Industrial Relations took place in 2020 as an e-Academy and a new module for the Industrial Relations Global Toolkit (IR Toolkit) on strengthening industrial relations in times of crisis was used in online training. This online modality allowed for a larger number of participants to attend, and to have a higher proportion of women involved. In India, it led to the development of guidelines to establish COVID-19 workplace task forces to better respond jointly to the challenges of the pandemic; in Nepal, the collective bargaining module stood out.[48]

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46 ILO, Peak-level social dialogue as a governance tool during the COVID-19 pandemic: Global and regional trends and policy issues, Policy Brief, 2020.

47 ILO, United Nations sustainable development cooperation and decent work: A trade union reference manual, 2020.

48 *ILO, Outcome-based funding support to ILO projects in the field of employment and skills, social dialogue and labour relations, protection for all at work, gender equality and equal opportunities, and just transition to the green economy for the period 2020–21O. Final cluster evaluation* (Evaluation Office, 2021) (https://www.ilo.org/eval/Evaluationreports/WCMS_818207/lang--en/index.htm, accessed 5 October 2022).

▶ Dissemination of relevant knowledge products through social media, e-training sessions and webinars, highlighting innovative practices of social dialogue in response to the crisis, for example, research and policy briefs developed by DIALOGUE were used in seminars, workshops, and during calls with constituents on mobilizing a response through social dialogue.[49]

▶ With ILO support, workers' organizations in 28 Member States expanded outreach to previously unorganized workers, set up new organizations or developed new services to support workers in tackling COVID-19-related challenges, including through new digital tools and increased online media presence.[50]

▶ ACTRAV organized over 40 webinars for workers' organizations operating at global, regional, subregional and national levels.

ILO capacity building support was positively regarded by workers' organizations in the case study countries. In **Montenegro**, a Trade Union representative described how ILO through ACTRAV supported its research of the perception of workers of COVID impacts (for example, on the role of trade unions, collective bargaining, work status, stability of contracts). This fed into its communication strategy: "...our visual identity was improved as we received support from ILO PR and marketing experts... we improved our presence on social networks and the public was in touch with us." In Viet Nam, assistance included ICT and Zoom accounts being provide to the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour to support its engagement with members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike the situation with employers, the Programme Implementation Report on Output 1.2 of the P&B ("Increased institutional capacity of workers' organizations") showed that targets were not met (54 versus 71 against two output indicators). The OBW report noted a "digital divide" which hampered the work of many trade unions during the pandemic, "both with their own members, and with the ILO.[51]" Workers' representatives recognized this weakness in capacity but were also cautious about going too far down the path of remote serving of workers. As one representative said:

> **Many poor, precarious workers need to be contacted in the traditional way. Much of SECTOR's work did not go down the digital path as too many workers are not equipped for it. Traditional communication for workers – such as handing out leaflets outside a factory – will continue and needs ILO's support.**

Another said, "We need to remember that collective, face-to-face contact remains important and builds trust. Also, some people [in countries where Freedom of Association is not guaranteed] will have concerns about being overheard when using digital communication." The OBW report highlighted how digitalization of products and services expanded the reach of the ILO's capacity development. But it noted also that many constituents wanted a "blended strategy" that included face-to-face interactions.

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49   GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1)

50   GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1)

51   ILO, 2020:11

Outcome 1 of the P&B also covers the ILO's work in building the capacity of labour administration and social dialogue institutions and in enhancing collective bargaining and workplace cooperation within Member States. The pandemic required a major re-assessment of priorities and workplans as Member States sought information on global policy and practices in response to the crisis, support for building the capabilities of labour administration staff, policies and protocols to monitor compliance with safe return to work legislation, and policy and guidance on working hours and fundamental principles and rights at work.

From the case studies, in **Serbia** a Ministry of Labour representative said that "the most important ILO contribution in the COVID period was the analysis of the proposed changes to the Law on Seasonal Workers. This is one of the most important laws in every country that concerns almost all citizens". In **South Africa**, the ILO lobbied very hard for the Ministry of Labour and employer and workers' organizations to be part of the presidential coordinating committees. It also helped with the issue of ensuring that the workers themselves and employers, particularly the workers, would advocate what kind of policies were needed. In **Iraq**, through an EU-funded COVID-19 response project, ILO supported the development of a national OSH policy and programme in consultation with social partners and gave technical support to government officials, particularly labour inspectors and staff of the National Center for Occupational Health and Safety. In **Montenegro**, the ILO supported the Ministry of Labour in updating its teleworking policies.

The ILO organized virtual meetings and webinars with labour administration institutions, trained labour inspectors remotely, supported virtual labour inspection assessments, and developed a new online platform for capacity building, engaging with labour inspectorates and monitoring strategic compliance plans[52]. Much of ILO's planned work in support of social dialogue was shifted to online or remote delivery, including the academy on social dialogue and industrial relations, online advice to constituents, and desk-based review of legislation and policies. Face-to-face facilitation of tripartite negotiations were postponed and progress towards some outcomes stalled in some locations. Capacity building to support Member States to address the needs of key sectors was an important focus including for frontline sectors such as health and emergency services as well as hard-hit sectors like tourism and civil aviation.

The Programme Implementation Report 2020–21 showed that performance in the relevant P&B outputs (1.3 and 1.4) exceeded targets (39 versus 33 in 1.3,[53] improving the capacity of labour administrations; and 45 versus 35 in 1.4, strengthened social dialogue). However, a more meaningful performance story can be found in the narrative section of this report which mentioned that many of these results referenced the "use of social dialogue to develop effective country responses to COVID-19" and ILO's contribution to "strengthening labour dispute resolution systems as a mechanism to address the consequences of the pandemic, particularly in Asia and the Pacific and Europe and Central Asia."[54]

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52 ILO, 2020:7

53 Indicator 1.3.2, Member States with strategic compliance plans, was under target (9 versus 13). This was counter-balanced by being over target in 1.3.1, Member States with improved institutional frameworks (30 versus 20).

54 GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1), p. 31.

The ITCILO played a central and much expanded role in building constituent capacity to meet the many new challenges faced during the pandemic. It has run programmes for governments, and employers' and workers' organizations for almost 60 years. During the pandemic, it faced a surge in demand for its services whilst concurrently shifting further towards remote delivery. According to the March 2022 Programme Implementation Report to the GB.[55]

> **The pace of transformation at the Turin Centre accelerated in 2020–21. Driven by a surge in online training, the number of participants in the Centre's activities more than doubled. The Workers and Employers Activities Programme tripled its distance learning outreach, compensating for the temporary suspension of face-to-face training activities.**

The quality of this training was reported to have been maintained – a 2021 evaluation of the impact of distance learning activities (commissioned by ITCILO) and covering more than 9,000 participants reported that similar or higher level of knowledge acquisition and application rates were achieved compared with previous assessments (see **Box 1**).

In some case study countries, the merits of virtual delivery of constituent support were questioned. In **Iraq**, for example, inadequate internet coverage and ministry and social partners' staff not being competent in the use of online platforms were reported as barriers – both in connection and in building trust. In **Mexico**, a constituent saw virtual delivery as being "a good alternative solution, but nothing replaces face-to-face, especially in meetings where there are more than two institutions." But other case study countries saw the ILO's increased use of technology in engaging with constituents as both effective and overdue. As a senior manager in **South Africa** put it:

> **COVID forced us to use the tools we had. It was an opportunity to push us further in terms of our methods and to engage with our social partners, government and the UN in a much more aggressive way. Colleagues in other parts of Africa had challenges, but here in the southern part, it was an opportunity.**

55   GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1)

▶ Box 1: Constituent capacity building during the pandemic: ITCILO in Turin

Background

ITCILO is the capacity development arm of the ILO. While its primary targets are ILO constituents, it also provides services for the ILO's work in support of constituents, to other UN agencies, and for ILO partners involved in promoting Decent Work and social justice. Around 60 per cent of its services are in the form of training for individual learners. The other 40 per cent relate to institutional or system-level capacity development in such areas as strategy, training material development, event facilitation, project management, and data services for knowledge management. The progressive digitization of ITCILO services commenced well before the pandemic began and it was therefore well placed to respond to the unexpected challenge of COVID-19 – as one informant put it, "we were prepared for 2020, we just didn't know what we were prepared for."

Growth in the number of individual constituents trained

COVID-19 greatly accelerated ITCILO's planned diversification from face-to-face training towards distance learning. Almost 28,769 constituents were trained in the 2020-21 biennium, a figure that was 300 per cent above target. Compared with the previous biennium, the number of workers trained increased by 82 per cent to 12,381; employers by 81 per cent to 7,224; and staff from Ministries of Labour by 105 per cent to 9,164.[56]

Online training was delivered in both self-guided or tutor-based modes (or via a blend). The self-guided training was free, accessible 24 hours a day and in different languages. The most popular courses related to OSH, International Labour Standards, the MNE Declaration and supporting SMEs during COVID-19.

Increase in institutional capacity development support for constituents

Constituents and related entities, including EBMOs, trade union training bodies, OSH training institutes, and labour administration training centres, commissioned ITCILO to develop online courses and learning platforms in the context of COVID-19 (for example, the Employers Confederation of the Philippines new eCampus platform which has enabled it to offer capacity development services to its members and more broadly in the Pacific[57]).

Virtual event facilitation services also became an important service for the ILO and constituents – webinars, virtual conferencing, virtual fairs and exhibitions,[58] and dialogue events. HLE informants pointed to the contributions made by ITCILO in supporting the digitization of ILO tools and programmes that support constituents and their members – for example, SCORE, WED, and SIYB in the Enterprises Department, use of an ITC platform for sectoral skills anticipation work, capacity building in digitalization for national training systems (for example, in Indonesia) and educators (for example, in Senegal), and the conduct of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) covering topics such as Business and Decent Work,[59] Quality Apprenticeships and Recognition of Prior Learning,[61]

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56   Data provided by ITCILO sourced from e-campus, MAP, and SOLICOMM. Figures include both face-to-face and distance learning.

57   Employers Confederation of the Philippines, "Welcome to ECOP eCamp".

58   For example, the ILO's Enterprises Department ran a virtual fair on innovations in sustainable enterprises.

59   ITCIL, "Massive Online Open Course – business and Decent Work: How enterprises contribute to achieve decent work for all (SDG 8)", 2021.

60   ILO, "MOOC on quality apprenticeships. ILO webinar on Innovations and Strategies for Quality Apprenticeships", 2020.

61   ILO, Webinar: "Technological innovations in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)", 2022.

▶ **Box 1: Constituent capacity building during the pandemic: ITCILO in Turin (cont'd.)**

Perspectives on the shift to distance learning during COVID-19

Informants were almost universally appreciative of the role played by ITCILO during the pandemic. Not only did it contribute to ILO and constituents' business continuity in the context of the initial crisis and the constraints it imposed on service delivery, but it has accelerated the adoption of new approaches, long anticipated but slow to be realized, that could be used to address longstanding weaknesses in ILO's operations: scale and reach. As one senior policy manager put it: "In the past, it might have cost US$200,000 to train 20 people in a residential course but the business model is now changed, and we could conceivably aim to train a million people in a year."

Questions about the relative quality and impact of this training were raised, but ITCILO reported that participant satisfaction levels in 2020–21 (which were mainly delivered remotely) remained about the same as in 2018–19 when face-to-face delivery dominated.[62] An evaluation commissioned by ITCILO in 2021 reported that 94.3 per cent of online learners stated that they applied new knowledge in their work.[63]

Constituents were impressed with ITCILO's digitalization of its capacity development work, but had some "mixed feelings", especially about access for vulnerable groups without digital skills and tools. ITCILO is alert to the issue of digital inclusion and has even published a guidance paper on the subject that specifically looks at new "exclusion dynamics" brought by COVID-19 for certain groups.[64]

Analysing how these dynamics might have affected access to capacity development for constituents and their members was beyond the scope of the HLE, but to fully harness the potential of digitization, ITCILO needs to work closely with ACTRAV and ACT/EMP to better understand access barriers and to work on inclusion strategies at a global and local level. At the same time, the limits of digital approaches need also be acknowledged as do the benefits of face-to-face human interaction.

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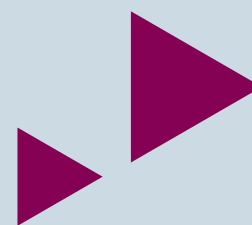
62   Average score was 4.46 in 2020–21, down from 4.49 in 2018–19, on a five-point scale where 5 denoted high satisfaction.

63   Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Kyungmee Lee. Evaluation of the online training activities of ILO's International Training Centre (Turin Italy). Final evaluation, 2021. Future evaluations will separately assess online learning and face-to-face training impact to allow for cross-comparisons.

64   ITCILO. Digital inclusion in adult learning – practices and recommendations, 2021.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE UN RESPONSE

KEY POINTS

▶ The ILO's technical expertise, normative role and ability to produce authoritative labour market data during the pandemic enhanced its profile and led to greater and higher level engagement within the UN system.

▶ While this was a positive outcome, it also may suggest a weakness in the ILO's marketing of its expertise and capacity in normal circumstances.

▶ This enhanced profile does not seem to have led to a corresponding increase in access to UN COVID response funds, especially at the country level. Some respondents noted that, for a variety of reasons, ILO often struggles at country level to get into United Nations Country Team (UNCT) proposals and approaches.

▶ The ILO's elevated profile has led to many new partnerships and commitments which, if fully implemented, will take the Organization way beyond its previous regular programmes in terms of scope and scale. This raises questions about its current resourcing and capacity to deliver especially at the country level.

Cooperation with the multilateral system was a key element of the Centenary Declaration. A resolution of the UN General Assembly in September 2019 endorsing the Declaration[65] reinforced its importance and noted its "multidimensional focus that incorporates Governments, the private sector, civil society, non-governmental organizations, employers' and workers' organizations", among others. The pandemic provided an early "real world" test of the readiness and capacity of ILO to bring the collaborative principles of its Declaration into practice in implementing a policy response.

From the early days of the pandemic, ILO proved itself to have the capacity to respond rapidly to many of the challenges posed. Two factors seen to underpin this readiness were the normative role of ILO regarding labour and employment, and its capacity to produce authoritative labour market data based on its extensive experience, expertise and networks in this area. **No other international body could match this combination**, which gave ILO a unique level of relevance to the situation and informed the UN system's pandemic responses at international and national level.

Under "normal" circumstances, several ILO entities play a role in shaping its relationships with the UN system and the broader international development landscape. The boundaries of responsibilities between them appear flexible, with some potential for overlap or competition. Broadly, DDG Policy assesses how ILO can best position itself among multilateral bodies, including international financial institutions (IFIs) and other UN agencies. ILO's Multilateral Cooperation Department provides partnership management and is the custodian of multilateral linkages. It covers who to work with and how and has a key role in partnership definition and coherence. When new partnerships trigger funding implications, PARDEV becomes involved. At country level, ILO is expected to participate in the development of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks under the oversight of the UN Resident Coordinator, within the evolving approach of the UN Reform Programme.

Although the formal allocation of responsibilities within ILO for interaction with UN agencies and other multilaterals did not change because of COVID, the pandemic gave rise to an **elevated number of high-level policy initiatives**, particularly within the UN community, as a result of which the engagement of DDG Policy with specialized agencies in New York, Washington and Geneva was heightened.

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65   UN, Resolution A/73/L.117

It was widely reported by stakeholders internal and external to the ILO that, during its regular operations, the Organization is stretched thinly across many areas and that this challenges the coherence and effectiveness of its activities. Its perceived role and profile within the UN system is therefore lower than that of some agencies with more resources and greater field presence (but higher than that of many other smaller agencies). However, in response to the pandemic, **ILO brought together its technical expertise, normative role and implementation capacity rapidly and largely coherently**, promoting an enhanced profile in such areas as jobs and social protection and **leading to greater and higher level engagement within the UN system**, which was reflected from global policy levels to country responses and later recovery planning.

One of the major regular mechanisms providing overall management of the complex range of commitments and activities of ILO is its **Senior Policy Management Team**. For specific circumstances, this can be strengthened by more frequent meetings or by extending team membership to bring in additional expertise. During the pandemic, this mechanism was an important foundation of ILO's readiness and capacity to act to meet emerging challenges and requirements.

Below this level, cross-departmental issues are often addressed through a **Task Team** approach. During the pandemic, the many challenges arising were addressed through multiple Task Teams; notably that steering the "Nowcasting" approach to labour market statistics and the Global Accelerator Task Team, which helped operationalize **ILO's contribution to this initiative of the UN Secretary General's Common Agenda** – enabling the world to move from response towards recovery, within an over-arching Just Transition approach.

Building on statistical analysis and the success of the [COVID Monitor](), ILO demonstrated its readiness and capacity to talk with authority at high-level discussions. Stakeholders among UN and other multilateral agencies confirmed that the profile of ILO among international development organizations was greatly raised. Although this trend is widely seen as a positive development, some respondents also noted that it points to a **weakness of ILO in marketing its expertise and capacity in normal circumstances**. Moving forward, it presents a challenge for ILO to maintain its heightened standing and influence (particularly among multilaterals), which will be essential to effectively promote SDG 8.

At a country level, the ILO's profile within the UN system was also enhanced through its COVID-19 response work, though this often **did not lead to a corresponding increase in accessing UN funds**. For example, in the ILO's East and Central Europe subregion, where most ILO country programmes are relatively small, the rapid and effective response of ILO (for example, through labour market change studies funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and OSH support to labour inspectorates) raised its profile with governments and within the UN system. However, despite this, its participation in UNCT programming often proved unsatisfactory, requiring substantial staff inputs for relatively small amounts of finance. Based on its early experience the subregional office took a decision not to participate in further UNCT proposals, which would produce funding for ILO of less than US$100,000. This was reinforced by the fact that only about 5 per cent of this office's voluntary funds come through UN sources.

Whilst the outputs of the ILO's Statistics Department are recognized as a prime example of ILO's capacity and readiness to respond to the pandemic, other parts of the Organization were reported to have taken more time to deliver. Some stakeholders noted that, during the early stages of the pandemic, many ILO units proposed initiatives for UN-wide approaches, but with little coherence. The New York Office tried to coordinate these. ILO then set up a cross-departmental working group, which promoted synergies and creative thinking and raised the capacity to respond. New, more flexible, ways of working emerged, particularly using online options for meetings and discussions.

The effects of COVID-19 meant that ILO had to work at many levels and across many policy areas as it interacted with other agencies in the UN system. Formally, the distribution of roles and responsibilities worked as usual during the pandemic. Informally, some respondents noted "mission creep" related to the dynamism and complexity of the institutional landscape. This was observed to be motivated both by enthusiasm to address challenges at country level and by the desire to get more funds for activities.

In this context, the pandemic raised questions as to **whether *any* UN agency understands how best to engage with other partners in the system**, as well as on the extent to which UN stakeholders understand and accept the limitations of their own agencies. Some respondents noted that ILO often struggles at country level to get into UNCT proposals and approaches. Partly, they attributed this to personal variations among resident coordinators and country teams. But it was also suggested that ILO must **learn how to put itself into such situations more effectively.** ILO **must be realistic about the scope** of its role at country level, carefully considering what it can deliver with available human and financial resources.

In this area, the pandemic highlighted an emerging pattern. In countries where ILO's programme of services is strong, UNCT members already know about ILO's tripartite approach with its constituents and can adapt to include this more broadly in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). In **countries with smaller ILO programmes, UNCTs face challenges** to incorporate the tripartite approach, which some agencies fear may lead to potential modification of proposed approaches and resultant funding and implementation delays.

In the evaluation's country case studies, particularly in non-resident countries, it was widely reported that ILO does not have the resources in place either at country or supporting office (regional office and subregional office) level to effectively scale up its collaboration within COVID recovery plans or UNSDCFs. In this respect, the Organization's **readiness (and willingness)** to participate in country-level frameworks and plans was often seen to be **ahead of its capacity to deliver**.

Reflecting this resource constraint, during the pandemic the ban on mission travel proved a challenge to many ILO activities. Given that ILO COs are often small, while in other countries there is no resident office presence at all, country-level planning and implementation is normally strongly supported by frequent missions by Decent Work specialists from regional, subregional and HQ offices. The online support, which replaced these missions for some time was valuable but not as effective as in-person expert missions to address complex specialist issues in planning or implementation. In South-East Asia, for example, it proved especially difficult to support activities in countries where ILO is not resident but other agencies are. Significant programmes ran into challenges because of the impossibility of support missions. For example, Cambodia has 70 programme and project staff but no CO, while Nepal has a much smaller programme, but with two resident international staff.

Approaches to ILO country-level staffing have been under discussion for some years, but the requirements for readiness and capacity to respond to a major pandemic have raised them again; **particularly in the context of UN reform, which places a premium on inter-agency collaboration and joint programming**. Several reviews and evaluations conducted during the pandemic have reinforced the major challenges ILO faces in terms of field capacity. During the pandemic period, projects under implementation faced a number of efficiency challenges. Since these projects were mostly designed and operational before COVID effects entered, it is likely that the challenges pre-existed but were exacerbated by the pandemic. An Evaluation Office Review[66] of projects evaluated during 2020 and 2021 reported that:[67] "Just over one quarter of the projects (26 per cent) had sufficient human and financial resources available to deliver project outputs, with project funds delivered in a timely manner, revealing another area of weakness". These limitations were also noted in the independent MOPAN Assessment[68] and in 2020–21 Programme Implementation report to the GB:[69]

> **In some cases, the ILO struggled to provide coordinated and timely support to the field, due to challenges in securing the required technical expertise on the ground, at the right time. Furthermore, the increase in requests to participate in coordination meetings and joint activities, alongside new requirements for joint reporting, showed that being responsive to UN-wide processes and initiatives requires substantial commitments in terms of time and resources.**

The pandemic has therefore reinforced long-standing questions around ILO's capacity to develop and run significant programmes in its non-resident countries or whether such programmes necessitate some presence to fully coordinate and promote ILO's interests. Some UN resident coordinators interviewed during the HLE maintained that it is **inevitable that other agencies will take over work within ILO's core areas**, since the Organization does not support its mandate with adequate resources at field or subregional level. HLE country cases showed that this has already occurred in a number of national COVID-response activities, where earlier ILO inputs have been followed up by other agencies, in the absence of appropriate ILO staff.

ILO's high-profile role in the UN Development System's response to COVID-19 has led to many new partnerships and commitments, intended to help enable the world to recover from the pandemic in a just, equitable and environmentally sustainable manner. **If fully implemented, these will take the Organization way beyond its previous regular programmes in terms of their scope and scale**. Since labour and employment are critical aspects of a global recovery, ILO has established itself as key stakeholder in the efforts of the development community to support this process. The initial stages of recovery have shown changes in labour markets, with many workers deciding that some sectors are too risky to re-enter and new sectors picking up increased demand. Moving forward through COVID recovery and beyond, ILO will need to focus on reducing the scale and effects of divergent recovery, including the unequal effects of the pandemic, with major burdens falling on women, vulnerable people and youths.

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66 ILO, *Decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations: Ex-post meta-analysis of development cooperation evaluations*, 2020 and 2021 (partial), 2021.

67 ILO, *Decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations*, 2020 and 2021 (partial).

68 MOPAN, "Assessment of the ILO. Overview", p. 3.

69 GB.344/PFA/1(Rev.1)

The major challenge will now be for ILO to deliver on its substantial new commitments, made as part of the overall UN COVID response. This can only be done through collaboration with a broad range of other bodies, to ensure both technical and financial sustainability of changes catalyzed or delivered. The recent MOPAN assessment highlights the need for the ILO to increase its impact through large-scale interventions with multi-donor participation and partnerships:[70]

> There are avenues for addressing the ILO's resource challenges through its partnerships. The organisation can capitalise on experiences gained from its financially self-sustaining multi-donor programmes. It can proactively identify synergies with development partners, leverage resources with other UN agencies, and build stronger ties with partners beyond its traditional ones. Deepening its collaboration with IFIs has particular potential, as their policies and analytical and support programmes, with a global reach and impact and backed by significant resources, bear a strong potential to leverage normative work, while allowing the IFIs to draw on the ILO's assets and add a new quality to their work.

Overall, ILO showed considerable readiness and capacity at policy level to respond to the COVID pandemic and greatly raised its profile in the international development landscape. In the HLE's surveys, staff and constituents rated engagement and collaboration with UN and other multilateral partners quite highly (see Paras. 218 and 222). At the same time, it is clear that this process was highly stressful on the Organization and pushed its capacity to the limits of its current structure and systems. If the many commitments made and targets set to achieve impact in the global recovery process are to be achieved, it seems inevitable that ILO will have to make substantial changes to the way it has been operating during "normal" times.

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70   MOPAN Assessment Overview, p 4.

PLANNING, MONITORING AND REPORTING THE ILO'S RESPONSE

KEY POINTS

▶ The ILO issued guidance on adjusting its planning, monitoring and reporting systems to capture the change of focus created by the pandemic, but in practice the tracking of its COVID-19 response through the RBM system was deficient.

▶ Results were often reported inconsistently and poorly.

▶ The nature of COVID-related changes made to CPOs were often not clearly visible via the Decent Work Results dashboard. It was often difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of actions without knowing what these actions were expected to achieve.

With the 2020–21 P&B only eight months into implementation when the pandemic hit, the ILO had to find a way for its established planning, monitoring and reporting systems to quickly adapt and to track its COVID responses. On 22 April 2020, PROGRAM issued *COVID-19: Guidance on the delivery of the Programme and Budget for 2020–21* which instructed rapporteurs on the measures introduced by HQ to adequately monitor and report on the COVID-19 adaptions and re-purposing in development cooperation actions. It emphasizes that ILO's priorities set out in P&B 2020-21 would remain as priorities and as an overarching framework into which COVID-19 responses could be factored. It acknowledges that the increase in requests to respond to COVID-19 would demand "adjustments in the focus and pace of the programme implementation" noting that:

▶▶ **Global deliverables set under the outputs of the Programme and Budget might have to be re-oriented or de-emphasized to the advantage of others that acquire greater relevance in view of evolving demands and circumstances. Country-specific strategies may also require revision. Adjustments in this respect will need to fit within the four interconnected pillars of the ILO framework for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as it affects the world of work.**

At the planning level, the implementation planning module for 2020–21 in IRIS was revised to identify planned ILO responses to COVID-19.[71] This revision included two new fields of information. The first was a dedicated section to add text elements of the strategy of a CPO or a GP addressing COVID-19 response. The second was a flag (yes/no format) to allow tracking of the correspondence between resourcing and reporting on achievements and results. The latter was then referred to as the "COVID-19 tag". As many as 106 Member States and territories followed this guidance note,[72] and more than one third of the CPOs planned at the start of 2020 and all GPs were adjusted based on it.[73]

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71 ILO, COVID-19: Guidance on the delivery of the Programme and Budget for 2020–21, 2020.

72 ILO, Report of the Director-General. Sixth Supplementary Report: The response of the International Labour Office to the COVID-18 pandemic, GB.340/INS/18/6

73 GB.340/INS/18/6

The guidance note referred to the OBWs for the biennium and the ILO Programme Implementation Report 2020–21 as being the reporting channels to demonstrate the work performed by the Office in relation to the response to COVID-19. To ensure fruitful discussions between OCTs and field offices, the first OBW review of the biennium, due in June 2020, was deferred until December 2020, to cover the results from January to December 2020. This measure included the development of a dashboard to effectively monitor progress, and the facilitating role of PROGRAM in communicating between OCT leaders and field offices. Virtual meetings for the OBW review were open to all people involved (for example, a senior ILO officer referred to meetings for one outcome being attended by more than 200 people, something not possible pre-pandemic). The revised reporting system provided rapporteurs with a text box to describe the COVID-19 response actions related to each CPO or GP.

Planned developments in the monitoring and reporting systems aim to better align within the results-based management (RBM) system the programmatic and financial dimensions. One senior ILO officer said this would align CPOs, DWCPs and P&B outcomes for the first time, facilitating the tracking of resources to CPOs and outputs, and making relevant data available before results are reported. From the perspective of this HLE team, this would be a great improvement, allowing more timely and accurate analysis of effectiveness and efficiency of ILO's policy actions.

Other perspectives on the monitoring and reporting systems within HQ referred to weaknesses in the current approach of dollar-value. This approach uses expenditure as a measure of effectiveness. A senior ILO officer stated that "We don't measure properly what we are trying to achieve" and that "spending on delivery is not a good measure of effectiveness for project activities". This is so because, with the same dollar, activities cutting across different policy actions are possible. However, IRIS is designed to allocate one dollar for one marker rather than allowing the same dollar to have a multiplying effect. This posed challenges in reporting on the SDGs, for instance, and in reporting the ILO's COVID-19 response. Alternatively, the delivery of outputs in comparison with plan could be emphasized as a measure of effectiveness.[74] ILO has a staff member participating in the UN future data cube initiative, in New York, to examine this approach of financial reporting and effectiveness of actions for the United Nations.[75] Another option for improving monitoring is analysing volumes of activity from the flow of financial resources in different policy areas. These volumes would talk more about what people actually realize. ILO has a system that monitors this but does not use it to assess effectiveness.

Ultimately, the ILO's tracking of its COVID-19 response through the RBM system was deficient. Some adjustments were made at the planning stage to some CPOs, but the nature and intent of these changes were not visible through the Decent Work Results dashboard – often they could only be inferred. This meant that the HLE was placed in a position of evaluating the effectiveness of actions without always knowing exactly what these actions were expected to achieve.

Despite the tracking adjustments made to the monitoring and reporting system that were described above, details of results were often imprecise or poorly reported. For example, some rapporteurs used the text box to explain the link between CPO results and the ILO's COVID-19 response, but others used it to describe general contextual information about COVID-19 or simply left it blank. There were also probably many examples of effective ILO COVID response actions which, for whatever reason, were not attached to a reported CPO result and so remained invisible.

The HLE developed an analytical strategy designed to overcome, as much as possible, these deficiencies in the reporting of the ILO's COVID-19 response. Results of the analysis are set out in **Section 4.7**.

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74   ILO, Implications of COVID-19 for delivery of the Programme and Budget for 2020–21 (GB/34/PFA/2), 2021.

75   UNSDG-UNSCEB, Data standards for United Nations system-wide reporting of financial data (New York, NY; 2022).

The ILO's Evaluation Office (EVAL) also updated its procedures and protocols to ensure continued accountability and real-time learning on the effectiveness of existing and new development cooperation projects. Within two weeks of the pandemic being declared, EVAL published Practical tips on how to conduct and manage ongoing and planned evaluations. In October 2020, it published a Protocol on collecting evaluative evidence on the ILO's COVID-19 response measures through project and programme evaluations, which served as a model of "what" should be evaluated based on the ILO's policy response framework and outlined adaptive approaches towards planning and managing project and programme evaluations. It also published a paper on evaluative lessons from past crises and the synthesis review used in this HLE.

Results from the external ex-post quality appraisal of evaluation reports from 2020–21, commissioned by EVAL, showed that the overall quality ratings for evaluations in 2021 were above those from 2019. This suggests that the various measures taken by Evaluation Managers and EVAL, including updated and new tools and checklists and extending the timelines of evaluations, may have had positive effects on the overall quality of evaluation reports. All survey respondents consulted for this study found the relevance, clarity and applicability of the evaluation protocol (mentioned above) to be "satisfactory" or above.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE STAFF AND CONSTITUENT SURVEYS

Staff

The staff survey included questions designed to measure staff opinions on the ILO's institutional response to the pandemic in terms of overall preparedness, the things it did well in its response, obstacles faced, the responses that should be continued, obstacles faced in the response, and its collaboration with other UN agencies.

In terms of **overall preparedness** for the crisis, staff were asked to rate how well the ILO managed the uncertainty and unpredictable changes in the early stages of the pandemic, such as adapting existing activities and adjusting its work to new priorities. On a 10-point scale where zero denoted "not prepared at all" and 10 denoted "very well prepared", the overall average score across the organization was 5.62. Within this a somewhat higher average rating of 5.95 was given to the ILO's preparedness for the development, adaptation and implementation of ILO's institutional and administrative policies, and procedures to ensure business continuity. More senior ILO staff in the field rated preparedness higher with an average score of 7.0 given while development cooperation project managers gave a lower rating of 4.25. Note that this question was not a measure of how well the ILO adapted, but how well prepared it was to make such adaptations (figures 5 and 6).

FIGURE 5: ILO STAFF SCORES ON THE PREPAREDNESS OF THE OFFICE TO MANAGE THE CRISIS RESPONSE (AVERAGE SCORE)
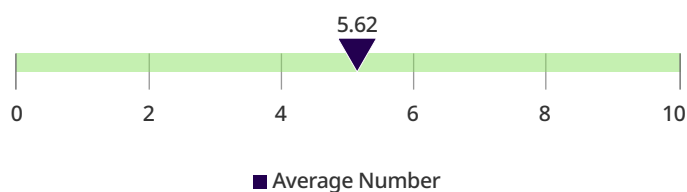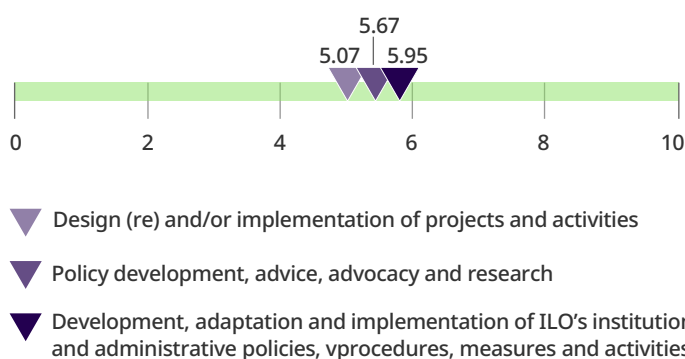

■ Average Number

FIGURE 6. ILO STAFF SCORES ON THE PREPAREDNESS OF THE OFFICE BY TYPE OF RESPONSE (AVERAGE SCORE)

▼ Design (re) and/or implementation of projects and activities

▼ Policy development, advice, advocacy and research

▼ Development, adaptation and implementation of ILO's institutional and administrative policies, vprocedures, measures and activities

The survey also asked staff to identify the "**top three successes**" (if any) of the ILO's institutional response during COVID-19. "**Occupational Safety and Health for ILO staff**" was by far the most frequent response (77.1 per cent), followed by "Information Technology tools and platforms" (35.9 per cent) and "Knowledge management and dissemination of information" (35.1 per cent). In terms of the top three successes that staff believed should be continued, "teleworking" was the top response followed by "digitalization", "communication", "*ILO Monitor*" and "agility".

The "**top three obstacles**" identified to the Organization's swift response were "**human resource flexibility, putting staff where needed**" (37.9 per cent), "Programmatic agility and shifting the P&B to meet constituent needs" (31.9 per cent), and "financial agility and re-purposing of Regular Budget funds" (30.2 per cent). Staff responses to the "top three shortcomings" that compromised the impact of the ILO's actions were "bureacracy", "coordination" and "communication" (figures 7 and 8) .

FIGURE 7: STAFF VIEWS ON THE MAIN SUCCESSES OF THE OFFICE IN ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FIGURE 8: STAFF VIEWS ON THE MAIN OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED BY THE OFFICE IN ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When asked about how the ILO had **collaborated with other UN agencies** in its response to COVID-19, 23.6 per cent of staff responded "to a very significant extent" while another 35.4 per cent said it collaborated "to an extent". **How well ILO actions complemented** efforts carried out by these agencies, other development actors and national governments staff gave ratings of 17.6 per cent for "to a very significant extent" and 36.5 per cent for "to an extent".

Constituents

As mentioned in the section on methodology, the overall response rate to the constituent survey was 8.5 per cent and the completion rate was 46 per cent. Participation was heavily skewed towards workers' organizations with 62.2 per cent of responses, with employers' organizations representing 27.7 per cent and government agencies with just 8.4 per cent. Mindful of these limitations, the constituent survey produced the following results.

Preparedness – constituents were asked a similar question to that asked of staff above and gave a slightly higher average rating of 5.9 per cent. Preparation for the implementation of projects and activities in response to the crisis was rated higher at 7.5 per cent (figures 9 and 10).

FIGURE 9: SURVEYED CONSTITUENTS AND PARTNERS SCORES ON THE PREPAREDNESS OF THE OFFICE TO MANAGE THE CRISIS RESPONSE (AVERAGE SCORE)
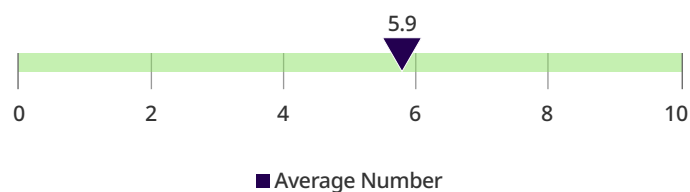
FIGURE 10. SURVEYED CONSTITUENTS AND PARTNERS SCORES ON THE PREPAREDNESS OF THE OFFICE BY TYPE OF RESPONSE (AVERAGE SCORE)

▼ Policy, advice, advocacy and research related to COVID-19

▼ Implementation of projects and activities on ILO's
response to the crisis (2020-2022)

Business continuity – 56 per cent of constituents reported that the ILO had strengthened their **capacity to continue their work during the pandemic** to either a "very significant extent" (23.2 per cent) or "an extent" (33.3 per cent). Another 31.9 pr cent said the ILO had strengthened their capacity "to some extent".

Collaboration and complementarity – constituents considered the ILO had collaborated with other UN agencies with 48.6 per cent in the top two ratings, although another 30 per cent said they did not know. Similarly, in terms of complementarity of the ILO's work with that of these agencies, other development actors and national governments, 51.4 per cent gave a top two rating and 25.7 per cent said they did not know.

Efficiency – constituents were asked how they rated the institutional efficiency of the ILO across several categories. The highest ratings of efficient or very efficient were given to "use of expertise and knowledge available" (81.1 per cent), "timeliness in the dissemination of ILO's policy and knowledge products" (68.5 per cent), and "timeliness in delivering technical advice and services" (67.3 per cent). These ratings were all significantly higher than those given by staff which were 67.7 per cent, 60.8 per cent and 54.0 per cent, respectively.

Top three successes – constituents ratings reflected the staff ratings with "**Occupational Safety and Health for ILO staff**" (65.4 per cent), followed by "Knowledge management and dissemination of information" (49.1 per cent) and "Information Technology tools and platforms" (38.1 per cent) the highest. In terms of the top three successes that constituents believed should be continued, the most frequent responses were "communication", "social dialogue", "international labour standards" and "technical support".

Top three obstacles – constituents' ratings were also similar to the staff ratings, with "**human resources flexibility, putting staff where needed**" seen as the biggest obstacle to a swift response during the pandemic, followed by "financial agility and re-purposing of regular budget funds" (34.1 per cent) and development cooperation funds (29.3 per cent). Constituents' responses to the "top three shortcomings" that compromised the impact of the ILO's actions were "financial support", "resource mobilization" and "international labour standards" (figures 11 and 12).

FIGURE 11: CONSTITUENTS AND PARTNERS VIEWS ON THE MAIN SUCCESSES OF THE OFFICE IN ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FIGURE 12: CONSTITUENTS AND PARTNERS VIEWS ON THE MAIN OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED BY THE OFFICE IN ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC