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MEDIUM-TERM PLAN FOR THE PERIOD 1980-1983

Identification of activities that have been completed or are
obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the identification of activities that have been completed or are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective (A/C.5/35/40). This report was submitted in response to Economic and Social Council decision 1980/179 of 25 July 1980, by which the Council decided to endorse the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) at its twentieth session, held from 5 May to 14 June 1980. 1/ One of the recommendations made by CPC relates to part II of the report of the Secretary-General on the programme performance of the United Nations for the biennium 1978-1979 (A/C.5/35/1 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and 2). The recommendation is as follows:

"The Committee noted with concern that the submission of the programme performance report of the United Nations for the biennium 1978-1979 was being inappropriately used by the Secretariat to respond to the mandate laid down in General Assembly resolution 34/225. Since part II of the report (A/C.5/35/1 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and 2) did not provide the information called for in paragraph 3 of the resolution, the Committee recommends that the Economic and Social Council should reiterate to the Secretary-General the need to provide the information in a report which would be submitted to the Assembly at its thirty-fifth session." 2/

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/35/38), chap. X.

2/ Ibid., para. 378.

2. According to the Secretary-General, the report also responds to paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 34/225 of 20 December 1979, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General "to propose to the General Assembly at its thirty-fifth session criteria and arrangements to promote the development of an efficient procedure for the identification of activities that have been completed or are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective".

3. The question of the identification of activities that have been completed or are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective has been before the General Assembly since its thirtieth session, when it adopted resolution 3534 (XXX) on 17 December 1975. Subsequently, it has been addressed in resolutions 31/93 of 14 December 1976, 32/201 of 21 December 1977, 33/204 of 29 January 1979 and 34/225 of 20 December 1979. The report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/35/40) is his third report on the question; the two earlier reports were contained in documents A/C.5/35/1 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and 2, and A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1. 3/

4. In his report, the Secretary-General attributes the slow progress made on this issue largely to the absence of "a systematic framework" and an "efficient procedure" for the identification exercise (A/C.5/35/40, para. 2). In his report he reviews past efforts, identifies failures and submits related recommendations. The Secretary-General states that the difficulties experienced in the identification exercise stem from the fact that the exercise has not been adequately integrated into the existing planning and programming process of the United Nations. The report describes the Secretary-General's plan of action to achieve that integration.

5. The Secretary-General's report is organized under the following subheadings:

(a) The identification exercise applied to current activities, in response to Economic and Social Council decision 1980/179 (paras. 4-13). The results of the exercise are contained in tables 1 and 2 of the annex to the report;

(b) Analysis of the preceding exercises in the context of the preparation of the medium-term plan (paras. 16-18) and the programme budget (paras. 19-20), of the programme performance report (paras. 21 and 22) and of the in-depth evaluation reports (paras. 23-31);

(c) Lessons to be drawn from the experience and suggested future procedures - with respect to the criteria to be utilized (paras. 35 and 36), the establishment

3/ The first report (A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1), which contained quantified data on the completion and termination of programme elements, was linked to two other reports in which the Secretary-General discussed steps already taken towards better identification of output (A/C.5/34/2) and internal work programmes and procedures established for reporting on programme implementation (A/C.5/34/3).

of internal work programmes (paras. 37-39), the involvement of the intergovernmental bodies concerned (paras. 40 and 41), the planning process (paras. 42-46), programme performance reporting (paras. 47-49) and the preparation of the next programme budget (paras. 50 and 51);

(d) Conclusion (paras. 52-54).

6. The two tables of the annex give a summary of the activities in the programme budget for the biennium 1980-1981 which are considered to be obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective (table 1) and of the estimated resources related to the activities so identified, in terms of work months of Professional staff (table 2). They complement the tables contained in part II of the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/35/1 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and 2).

7. In paragraph 8 of his report, the Secretary-General states that a number of activities identified in table 1 have already been drawn to the attention of the relevant intergovernmental review bodies which, in several instances, have taken action to exclude them from their current programmes of work. The Secretary-General goes on to say that "consequently, the General Assembly may now wish to endorse or revise those actions and decide whether those activities should be terminated and excluded from the 1980-1981 programme budget".

8. The Advisory Committee notes that CPC has accepted the tentative criteria for the identification of activities that are considered to be obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective which the Secretary-General proposed in his programme performance report for the biennium 1978-1979 (A/C.5/35/1, part II, para. 16). Acceptance by CPC was "on the understanding that they would be further refined and then applied more strictly in future examinations". ^{4/} In paragraph 36 of his report (A/C.5/35/40), the Secretary-General states that "there still remains the question of nomenclature and procedure" in respect of those criteria.

9. In paragraph 40 of his report (A/C.5/35/40), reference is made to the following recommendation of CPC:

"As a general practice, to be followed wherever possible, the Secretariat should submit proposals for the termination of activities to the appropriate intergovernmental body, rather than taking unilateral decisions". ^{5/}

The Secretary-General shares the view of CPC. He states that it is also the function of the intergovernmental bodies concerned "to decide on priorities, relative usefulness and evaluation" (A/C.5/35/40, para. 41). In this connexion he indicates that the medium-term plan is the first and essential framework for the identification of activities that must be discontinued. Accordingly, programme managers will be asked to identify such activities in the context of the preparation of the medium-term plan. In paragraphs 45 and 46 of his report, the

^{4/} Ibid., para. 309.

^{5/} Ibid., para. 379.

Secretary-General outlines the steps he is now taking to introduce changes in the procedures for the preparation of the proposed medium-term plan for the period 1984-1989.

10. As regards the involvement of the intergovernmental bodies in the planning and programming process, the Secretary-General, in paragraph 43 of his report, draws attention to General Assembly resolutions 31/93 and 34/224 on medium-term planning. In paragraph 9 of resolution 31/93 the Assembly stressed the responsibility of the Secretary-General to draw to the attention of the competent intergovernmental bodies activities that were obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective, indicating the resources which could be released so that the bodies concerned might take the necessary action. In paragraph 2 (p) of resolution 34/224, the Assembly decided to establish the principle that the medium-term plan should clearly identify new activities; the planning process should also make it possible to identify completed activities or activities of marginal utility.

11. The Secretary-General believes that the involvement of the sectoral, functional and regional intergovernmental bodies in the formulation of the medium-term plan will also give them the opportunity to deal with issues related to the identification exercise. In this connexion, he states that an effective participation of these bodies would facilitate a better integration between what are now two different and loosely related programming cycles with two different sets of documents, i.e. on the one hand, the medium-term plan and subsequent programme budget and, on the other, the programme of work of the bodies concerned (para. 44).

12. In paragraphs 23 to 30 the Secretary-General reviews the efforts made for the development of guidelines for internal programme evaluation in the context of the in-depth evaluation reports which have been considered by CPC since its seventeenth session. Upon inquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that steps had been taken to develop the evaluation process as a stage related to the entire planning and programming cycle. The representatives of the Secretary-General further indicated that the Evaluation Unit had extended its role beyond carrying out evaluation reporting on an ad hoc basis to modifying the planning and programming procedures with a view to systematically applying the process of evaluation. In this connexion, the Committee takes note of the statement in paragraph 31 of the Secretary-General's report that evaluation elements have been explicitly built into the preparation of the 1982-1983 programme budget and of the 1984-1989 medium-term plan.

13. The Advisory Committee notes the Secretary-General's statement in paragraph 50 of his report on the measures that have been introduced in the context of the preparation of the proposed programme budget for 1982-1983 with a view to assuring a more effective response to General Assembly resolutions on the identification exercise.

14. In paragraph 53 of his report, the Secretary-General includes a set of proposals intended to convert the identification exercise from the current ad hoc effort into an integral part of the programme planning process. The proposals are as follows:

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- (a) Reporting on activities completed will be limited to the programme performance reports which will be submitted on a biennial basis after the conclusion of the biennium; they will focus on the programme output level and use the biennial programme budget as a frame of reference;
- (b) Reporting on activities which are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective will be undertaken in the context of:
- (i) First, the proposed medium-term plan and subsequent revisions which will focus on the subprogramme or, when feasible, programme levels; the previous medium-term plan and/or the current programme budget as appropriate will be used as a frame of reference; no information on the related resources will be provided at that stage, but the medium-term plan will be used as a framework for the proposed programme budget;
 - (ii) The programme performance report in an ex post facto manner at the output level, as was done in the first performance report for the biennium 1978-1979;
- (c) In-depth programme evaluation reports will continue to deal with activities completed or to be discontinued.

15. The Advisory Committee believes that the Secretary-General's plan of action as described in document A/C.5/35/40 indicates the way in which further progress may be achieved, and recommends that the General Assembly should approve the proposals in paragraph 53. It expects that the first results will be reflected in the proposed programme budget for 1982-1983 and medium-term plan for the period 1984-1989.

16. In paragraph 54 of document A/C.5/35/40, reference is made to paragraph 6 of General Assembly resolution 34/225, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit at its thirty-sixth session, through the Advisory Committee, a full and comprehensive report on the implementation of Assembly resolution 3534 (XXX) and subsequent resolutions reaffirming it. The Secretary-General, noting that the plan of action described in his report might require more than a few months for the evaluation of its effectiveness, suggests that the Assembly may wish to defer to its thirty-seventh session the submission of the report requested in paragraph 6 of its resolution 34/225. The Advisory Committee concurs in the Secretary-General's suggestion.
