

GENERAL

E/ESCAP/1047

7 March 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Fifty-third session

23-30 April 1997

Bangkok

**REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE OF THE
COMMISSION: RESOLUTION 48/2**

(Item 5 of the provisional agenda)

**INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE OF THE
COMMISSION: REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES AND OTHER
REPRESENTATIVES DESIGNATED BY MEMBERS
OF THE COMMISSION**

INTRODUCTION

1. By resolution 52/1 of 24 April 1996 on preparation for the review of the conference structure of the Commission, the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission (ACPR) was requested to undertake an independent review of the conference structure of the Commission, and to provide its own recommendations in that regard. In that resolution the Commission also noted that the review would take into account the progress made in the preparatory exercise which had been initiated by the Executive Secretary to facilitate the comprehensive review by the Commission.
2. At its two hundred and seventh session, held on 19 September 1996, ACPR decided to set up the Informal Open-ended Working Group to examine the various issues in depth and prepare a draft report. The Group held 10 sessions between September 1996 and January 1997, during which it undertook a detailed review of the conference structure, including the work of each Committee. The report was adopted by ACPR at its two hundred and eleventh session, held on 21 January 1997, although it was noted that the views expressed did not cover all the views of every delegation which had taken part in the review. Moreover, one delegation expressed regret that the review of the Commission's conference structure had not included an examination in detail of the allocation of resources to specific projects and programmes, and identification of high priority and low priority items.
3. The review was guided to a great extent by the responses from Governments to a questionnaire circulated by the ESCAP secretariat. It had benefited from the views of representatives of the secretariat who participated in the deliberations at the invitation of the Group. The Executive Secretary had also made available the report of the secretariat Working Group on ESCAP Reform and, subsequently, the report of the secretariat Task Force on ESCAP reform.
4. ACPR also took into account the goals set out in General Assembly resolution 50/227 of 24 May 1996 on further measures for the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields. Specifically, it noted that the review of the regional commissions should be undertaken with a view to strengthening and enhancing their effectiveness as action- and policy-oriented bodies in the economic and development field with better response to the conditions and environments unique to the specific region and improving their coordination with the entire United Nations system. It also noted that a major purpose of the review should be to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the regional commissions by eliminating unnecessary duplication or overlapping of work and by ensuring a better structural relationship among those bodies and the Economic and Social Council.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. The thematic approach

5. The shift to the thematic conference structure was reviewed extensively. The thematic approach had enabled the secretariat to undertake more multidisciplinary activities, which was in consonance with the comparative advantage of ESCAP *vis-à-vis* the specialized agencies of the United Nations and other agencies that had competence in individual disciplines. The thematic approach had also brought about greater interaction among secretariat personnel. The Task Force had noted in its report that the thematic approach had fostered a better understanding by staff of the work of other Divisions and enhanced interdivisional working linkages. Above all, on a priority theme such as regional economic cooperation, the secretariat's activities had acquired greater thrust.

6. On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the thematic structure had not brought about very substantial improvements in the Commission's work. Difficulties stemmed from the fact that the division of responsibilities among government ministries in the region, as well as within the ESCAP secretariat, continued to be based mainly on sectoral lines. That necessitated a considerable degree of coordination all around, which was not so easily achieved, to take full advantage of the thematic approach. The thematic arrangements had also not attracted greater ministerial or high-level participation in Committee meetings. In addition, since the themes were very broad, covering a wide range of areas, there was sometimes a blurring of focus, with the result that the secretariat had to spread its resources too thinly.

7. On balance however, ACPR viewed the advantages of the thematic approach as outweighing the disadvantages. Considering that a process of evolution was preferable to any radical change, it felt that the right approach would be to consolidate the gains wherever made and make necessary changes in committees and subprogrammes where some reordering of programme areas or a clearer expression of focus could be to advantage. That was particularly felt in the themes relating to poverty alleviation, and environment and sustainable development. On the other hand, the work of the two sectoral committees, the Committee on Transport and Communications and the Committee on Statistics, was considered quite satisfactory. A summary of the views of ACPR in respect of the coverage of each committee is provided in the annex to the present report.

8. In proposing any change to the existing structure, ACPR considered it extremely important to take into account current development trends in the region wherein the imperatives of closer regional and subregional cooperation, rapid urbanization and accelerated infrastructure development were becoming more and more evident and needed to be adequately addressed. It was considered important that any changes to the conference structure should take into account the current budgetary situation of the United Nations.

B. Conference structure

9. Keeping the above in view, the majority of ACPR members recommended that the conference structure should consist of the following major subsidiary bodies, with the periodicity as indicated:

- (a) Committee for Regional Economic Cooperation, which would be assisted by a Steering Group of the Committee (annual).
- (b) Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Management (annual).
- (c) Committee on Rural and Urban Development (annual).
- (d) Committee on Social Development (biennial).
- (e) Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development (annual).
- (f) Committee on Statistics (biennial).

10. Some delegations considered that a single Committee on Poverty Alleviation through Economic Growth and Social Development as currently named, or with a new name "Committee on Social Development", would be adequate to deal with rural and urban development as well as social development and other poverty alleviation issues. A few delegations also saw some merit in the establishment of a Committee on Development Policy Analysis along the lines suggested by the Task Force, although other delegations considered that substantive macroeconomic research and analysis of the type to be undertaken by such a committee was already being done by other United Nations and related bodies. As for the new name, "Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Management", certain delegations felt that the current name, "Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development", could be retained, since protection of the environment went hand in hand with sustainable development.

11. Owing to certain constraints faced by the representatives of the countries concerned, no conclusive views regarding the retention or otherwise of the two special bodies concerned with the least developed countries, and with the landlocked and the Pacific island developing countries, were expressed and it was proposed that the subject could be discussed during the Regional Preparatory Meeting on the Review of the Conference Structure of the Commission, to be held in Bangkok from 24 to 28 February 1997.

12. ACPR felt that the revised set of Committees would facilitate a sharpening of focus and objectives. It was recognized that ESCAP would retain its relevance only if it responded adequately to the needs and aspirations of the Asian and Pacific region. On the other hand, particularly in the light of the current resources position, any projects and activities undertaken must be subject to a rigorous, open and transparent process of prioritization to ensure that resources were focused on those items of greatest benefit to the regional member States and to ensure the efficient use of the secretariat and other resources.

13. ACPR also recommended that efforts to avoid duplication and overlap both within ESCAP as well as between ESCAP and other United Nations and international financial organizations must continue to be made. In that regard, ESCAP should continue to play a leading role in coordinating United Nations activities in the Asian and Pacific region, through more effective operation of the

C. Work of the Commission

14. Since most of the Committees encompassed a number of sectors and their themes were rather broad, their agenda and clearly defined priorities should be determined by the Commission, guided by the recommendations of the Committees. The Committees themselves were generally unable to arrive at such decisions, given the competing sectoral interests to which they were subject. The Commission should also ensure that the secretariat had the requisite expertise and resources to undertake the work assigned to it.

15. The Commission should monitor closely the work of the Committees and ensure that they acted in line with their terms of reference and mandate. Effective supervision would also enhance the role of the Commission.

16. The ministerial segment of the annual Commission sessions could include an informal meeting of the heads of delegations to discuss specific issues which either had a strong bearing on improving the role and effectiveness of ESCAP or were urgent issues of regional development. A few delegations were, however, doubtful about the effectiveness of such a meeting since the heads of delegations in different cases could belong to different ministries.

17. ESCAP should not hold preparatory meetings for global conferences unless it was mandated to do so by higher authority or it was felt absolutely necessary. Rather, it should limit itself to implementing the decisions of the conferences at the regional level.

18. Ministerial conferences should be restricted to no more than one per year with effect from 1998. The number of ad hoc intergovernmental meetings convened with the prior approval of the Commission should not exceed five meetings a year.

D. Work of the Committees

19. Committee sessions should be well planned and organized in a manner which promoted interactive exchanges rather than limiting delegations to reading country statements. Expert presentations on identified topics, panel discussions and sectoral working groups could be organized to enhance the value of sessions.

20. Committee sessions generally should not exceed four working days.

21. Wherever possible, agendas of the Committees should include an item to review the action taken to implement the decisions of the previous Committee meeting.

E. General

22. There should be greater congruence between the committee and programme structures. The

Executive Secretary should be encouraged to continue his efforts to devise a secretariat structure which best served and was most responsive to the conference and programme structures.

23. Transparency with respect to resource use was needed. The member States considered it essential that ESCAP provide a detailed accounting of how it used its budget, and staff and time resources.

24. The Report of the Task Force on ESCAP Reform proposed that crosscutting issues should be mainstreamed in all subprogrammes, and a coordinating unit should be established to monitor and assess the incorporation of major crosscutting issues in the ESCAP programme of work. In the conference structure as proposed in the present report, such crosscutting issues might not be very many and other issues could easily be subsumed in the subprogrammes. The utility of establishing a coordinating unit would need to be assessed.

II. OTHER MAJOR ISSUES

25. In its review of the conference structure, ACPR also raised a number of related issues. For some of those issues there was no consensus. Those issues are briefly outlined in following paragraphs.

26. Some members felt that in order to conserve resources for reallocation to higher priority items and to allow longer-term planning for the allocation of resources, the Commission should consider meeting on a biennial rather than annual basis. On the other hand, several members pointed to the government responses to the ESCAP questionnaire, which indicated that a large majority of countries favoured annual Commission sessions. In their view, the Commission, as the highest decision-making organ, needed to meet annually to address the needs and priorities of the region in a timely manner.

27. A few delegations felt that at the annual Commission sessions when considering draft resolutions which called upon the secretariat to undertake new or additional work, the Commission should determine which other mandated work would have to be reduced to make room for new requirements.

REVIEW OF THE COMMITTEES

A. Committee for Regional Economic Cooperation

1. ACPR recognized that the promotion of regional economic cooperation was one of the primary roles of ESCAP mandated by its terms of reference. While some had argued that regional economic cooperation was an objective and therefore not appropriate as a theme for the ESCAP programme of work, ACPR felt that regional economic cooperation was not only a means to an end, but an end in itself. Such matters as promotion and expansion of intraregional trade and investment cooperation, and science and technology offered a host of opportunities for a well defined set of activities to enhance regional cooperation and should be actively explored.

2. According to the results of the questionnaire distributed by the secretariat, the Committee for Regional Economic Cooperation was the most efficient of the thematic committees. The workings of the Committee and its steering group were reviewed at the last annual Commission session. In the guidelines that were adopted the Steering Group was expected to evolve into a think tank that would benefit from interaction with the private sector and academics. Additional efforts should be made to ensure that that was achieved. The Committee should also seek to work towards avoidance of duplication of work undertaken in other forums, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

B. Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

3. There was broad agreement with the report of the Task Force on renaming the Committee "Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Management" since that had been the main thrust of secretariat activities under the subprogramme. Certain ACPR members, however, felt that the name of the Committee could be retained since protection of the environment and sustainable development should go hand in hand.

4. As for the issues to be dealt with by the Committee, it was felt that the environment was too broad an area and there needed to be sharper focus for activities to be undertaken at the regional level. Environmental issues which were of a global nature were already dealt with by the United Nations Environment Programme, the Commission on Sustainable Development and other organizations. ESCAP should focus on activities in the environment sector which could usefully be taken up at the regional and subregional levels and which, along with cooperation in water resources, mineral resources and space applications, could be the main areas of activity under the umbrella of the Committee. Activities dealing with energy and the generation of electrical power could be assigned to the Committee dealing with infrastructure.

5. The regional action programme adopted by ESCAP should be further elaborated and followed up in the areas dealt with by the Committee. The Committee should give high priority to the transfer of environmentally sound technology, natural disaster reduction, and space applications which should also include communications and education.
6. The Committee should meet annually.

C. Committee on Poverty Alleviation through Economic Growth and Social Development

7. Poverty alleviation was a high priority both for ESCAP and for the United Nations system as a whole. None the less, as a theme for ESCAP activities it appeared too broad and at least four divisions of the secretariat and several RICAP subcommittees dealt with issues which fell under the committee. That had made it difficult to ensure appropriate participation at committee sessions. Given the broad mandate of the committee, there was a need to be more selective about the topics covered.
8. ACPR considered a number of suggestions for replacing the Committee on Poverty Alleviation. One was to replace it with two committees: Committee on Social Development and Committee on Development Policy Analysis. However, concern was expressed that such a change would mean that ministries involved in rural and urban development would no longer take part in the Committee.
9. Another suggestion was to replace the Committee with a committee on rural and urban development and a committee on social development. Those two committees would have a more clearly defined scope and focus, which might help achieve greater participation of appropriate representatives from capitals, as well as greater congruence with the secretariat structure. The rural and urban development issues could be dealt with by alternate sessions of the Committee on Rural and Urban Development, which could be held annually and the Committee on Social Development which could be held biennially.
10. Concern was expressed by some delegations that increasing the number of committees could give rise to greater strain on resources and could lead to overlap between committees as they would share some areas of interest. They felt that if the focus of the work of the Committee on Poverty Alleviation was made clearer perhaps a single committee would be sufficient.

D. Committee on Transport and Communications

11. There was general consensus that the Committee had functioned effectively. The Committee had focused its attention on specific issues relating to the development of transport, communications and tourism in the ESCAP region in accordance with its terms of reference. ACPR also noted that there were no other global or intergovernmental bodies dealing with the development of land transport, inland water transport, facilitation of transport and freight forwarding, which were dealt with by the

Committee.

12. ACPR concurred with the recommendation of the Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure that the name of the Committee should be changed to Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development. It was agreed that the Committee would also deal with all energy related issues, including policy issues relating to infrastructure in the power sector. On the other hand, infrastructural issues relating to rural and urban water supply, and sanitation could be dealt with by the proposed Committee on Rural and Urban Development.

13. It was stressed that the Asian land transport infrastructure development project should be given priority and that ESCAP should work towards drafting agreements on the formalization of an international land transport network for coordinated development of Asia's land transport system. The Committee should also focus on filling gaps in the coverage by international organizations of the transport sector, for example by organizing training programmes in multimodal transport and maritime traffic.

14. The Committee should meet annually and each Committee session should concentrate on a limited number of specific preselected sectors.

E. Committee on Statistics

15. The Committee on Statistics had received the highest rating in the responses given by Governments to the ESCAP questionnaire. As a sectoral committee, it lent itself to easier operation and, therefore, effectiveness. ACPR noted that the Committee had taken a number of innovative approaches to improve its work, and those approaches might have broader applications. Among the approaches mentioned was the creation of a standing bureau comprising 4-6 regional member country experts to help coordinate the work of the Committee, assist in the development of draft agendas and set clear and specific goals. Committee agendas generally included an item on "actions taken" pursuant to items arising in earlier committee meetings. The practice of encouraging members to contribute papers on agreed items for discussion at committee meetings had also helped to strengthen active member country involvement.

16. The Committee should meet biennially.

F. Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries and Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries

17. ACPR noted that there was a need to focus on the special interests of the Pacific island and the least developed and landlocked developing countries as well as to help integrate them into the broader work of the Commission. For a variety of reasons -- lack of adequate funding, shortage of available personnel and vast travel distances -- participation by those countries in other ESCAP forums was limited. Because of their limited participation, those countries had been relatively less effective in shaping the programme of work of other committees. Many of the other committees did not focus on subjects of central interest to those countries, and the establishment within the secretariat of a special working group to coordinate work related to them had not functioned well. Few projects relating to the special needs of those countries had been undertaken.

18. A few of the affected countries that had participated in the deliberations of the Group felt that the Special Bodies should be maintained and further reinvigorated through effective coordination of their work with that of the other Committees. ACPR, however, felt the need to take fully into account the views of all the affected countries before making a recommendation on the future of the Special Bodies. It also noted that if they were to continue, their biennial meetings needed to be better focused and their agenda should be more active in order to encourage maximum participation.

G. Proposal to establish a new committee on development policy analysis

19. ACPR considered the proposal contained in the secretariat's Task Force Report to establish a committee on development policy analysis. Some delegations expressed the view that substantial macroeconomic research and analysis of the type to be undertaken by the proposed committee was already being done by non-ESCAP organizations. They questioned whether it was not duplicative for such a committee to undertake those responsibilities. A few other delegations, however, were of the view that such a committee would focus on major regional macroeconomic development issues and on the specific needs of regional least developed, landlocked and island developing countries and economies in transition. Such issues would not be dealt with in other ESCAP or United Nations bodies.