



General Assembly

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MAY 10 1982

Distr.
GENERALA/AC.172/74
4 May 1982

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Series of substantive meetings
Agenda item 2 (a) of the provisional agenda*

UN/SA COLLECTION

PROVISION OF MEETING RECORDS TO UNITED NATIONS ORGANS

Report by the Secretariat

I. PRESENT SITUATION

1. Until 1979 a number of subsidiary organs of the General Assembly received summary records of their meetings. With the adoption of resolution 34/50 of 23 November 1979, the General Assembly decided to discontinue the provision of such records for all its subsidiary organs, for an experimental period of one year. At the same time, the Assembly, by its decision 34/418, agreed upon the following exceptions: the International Law Commission and the Committee of the Whole established under General Assembly resolution 32/174. Subsequently, by its resolution 35/10 B of 3 November 1980, the General Assembly confirmed the continued applicability of its resolution 34/50 in respect of summary records for all those subsidiary organs of the General Assembly for which the provision of summary records had been discontinued (A/C.5/35/12, para. 4), for those organs which did not receive summary records prior to the adoption of resolution 34/50 and for those organs which might be established in the future. The Assembly further decided to grant exceptions to this rule to the following subsidiary organs, subject to review at its thirty-sixth session on the basis of recommendations of the Committee on Conferences:

- (a) Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People;
- (b) United Nations Council for Namibia;
- (c) United Nations Commission on International Trade Law and Legal Sub-Committee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space for sessions devoted to the preparation of draft conventions and other legal instruments;
- (d) Special Committee against Apartheid;
- (e) Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization;
- (f) Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean, when holding preparatory sessions for the Conference on the Indian Ocean envisaged in General Assembly resolution 34/80 B of 11 December 1979.

At the same time, these organs were requested to keep their requirements for summary records to a reasonable minimum and to dispense, whenever possible, with meeting records.

*A/AC.172/69.

2. Since the adoption of this resolution, the General Assembly has also authorized the provision of summary records to the Preparatory Committee for the Second Special Session of the General Assembly Devoted to Disarmament.

3. When considering the question of summary records in 1981, the Committee on Conferences concluded that the length of the review period had been too short to allow a final judgement about the utility and usefulness of summary records for the subsidiary organs concerned. Many delegations emphasized that any proposal in that regard should be such as not to affect adversely the operations of any organ and, therefore, that a piecemeal approach might be more appropriate than hard-and-fast decisions. The Committee also felt that the question should be discussed further in all of its aspects in 1982, including a consideration of possible and viable alternatives to the present practice, and it requested the Secretariat to submit an appropriate report.

4. Subsequently, the General Assembly, by its resolution 36/117 A, requested the Committee on Conferences to undertake, on a priority basis, a comprehensive study of the rationale that currently determines the provision of meeting records to United Nations organs with a view to identifying criteria for the selection of organs that should receive records in the future. The Assembly further requested the Committee on Conferences to take fully into account the potential offered by new technologies and to submit to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session appropriate recommendations in connexion with the above and with General Assembly resolution 35/10 B of 3 November 1980.

5. The Economic and Social Council, at its organizational meeting for 1982, decided to discontinue, for an experimental period of two years, the provision of summary records for its sessional committees (First (Economic) Committee, Second (Social) Committee, and Third (Programme and Co-ordination) Committee), and to keep the present format of the reports of the sessional committees (decision 1982/105). It may be recalled that the Council had already decided in 1979 to discontinue, for an experimental period of two years, the provision of summary records for all its subsidiary organs, although this rule was later modified to provide for exceptions in the case of the Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

6. With respect to special conferences, the General Assembly decided in 1981 that no summary records should be provided to such conferences and their preparatory organs, with the exception of legal codification conferences, for which the needs would be determined in each case.

7. The present report is submitted to assist the Committee on Conferences in its review of the matter pursuant to General Assembly resolution 36/117 A.

II. DATA CONCERNING THE PROVISION OF SUMMARY RECORDS

8. The following table provides information on the meeting activities of those subsidiary bodies for which summary records had been reinstated by General Assembly resolution 35/10 B.

Name of body	Number of meetings held in 1981 (with interpretation)	Number of summary records provided in 1981
Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People	13	9
United Nations Council for Namibia	17	14
UNCITRAL	20	19
Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space - Legal Sub-Committee	52	20
Special Committee against <u>Apartheid</u>	24	20
Special Committee on the Charter and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization (including Working Group and consultations)	44	14
<u>Ad Hoc</u> Committee on the Indian Ocean	51	42

9. The following table contains data on the total number of meetings covered by précis-writers, between 1975 and 1981, at Headquarters, Geneva and Vienna.

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
Headquarters, New York	798	853	848	895	988	676	741
Geneva	527	404	505	536	393	471	368
Vienna	-	-	-	20	31	48 a/	19

a/ 34 were non-UNIDO meetings.

10. As is evident from the above, in 1981 -the first Year resolution 35/10 B was in effect - an increase of more than 10 per cent in the number of summary records prepared occurred at Headquarters, while Geneva registered a decline by some 25 per cent.

11. Moreover it appears that practically all bodies for which an exception was granted heeded, to differing degrees, the appeal by the Assembly to keep their requirements to a reasonable minimum since the number of summary records provided in 1981 to those bodies is smaller than the number of their meetings held throughout that year.

III. TYPES OF MEETING RECORDS

12. At present, the United Nations Secretariat produces two types of written records of open meetings of intergovernmental bodies specifically authorized to receive them. Such records are either verbatim records, containing an edited word-for-word account of all statements and proceedings of a meeting, or summary records, providing a concise account of the essence of statements made at, and the proceedings of, a meeting. These two types of records differ in length: there is no limit for verbatim records, while a general limit of 15 pages and a desirable limit of 10 pages for a summary record of a standard meeting was agreed to by the General Assembly in 1975 when it approved a number of general criteria for meeting records. The same criteria stipulated that principal organs of the United Nations should continue to be provided with written meeting records, but that in respect of the subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly a more limited and selective approach should be encouraged, leading to a situation in which sound recordings should ultimately be the only records kept. In addition, the Assembly, in another resolution, ruled that no organ should be entitled to receive both types of written meeting records for any given meeting.

13. A complete list of the present meeting record entitlements by the various organs and intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations has been published in annex I to document A/INF/37/1.

14. The Secretariat also arranges for meetings of intergovernmental bodies to be recorded on audio and video tape. While the latter is usually reserved only for open meetings of main organs of the Organization, making sound recordings of both open and closed meetings is a common practice for meetings of all other subsidiary organs. They usually involve the English language and the floor channels, but also any other official language used at the request of the committee secretary prior to the meeting. Such sound recordings may be made on cassettes and reels. The type of recording used depends largely on the purpose of the recording, i.e. whether it is for archival purposes or for use by the Rapporteur or the substantive servicing secretariat of a body.

IV. RECORDS AND THEIR RATIONALE

15. The rationale underlying the provision of written meeting records can be generally characterized as follows:

- (a) To enable delegations to have the essence of their positions on particular issues formally and authentically recorded in printed form, in either a verbatim or an abridged version, in the working languages of a body;
- (b) To provide an authoritative account of all proceedings and decisions of a meeting;
- (c) To facilitate future reference to such authentic and officially issued texts;
- (d) To provide a readily available tool for delegations, both present at and absent from a meeting, enabling them to follow all developments at a particular meeting accurately and to have it as a basis for their reports to their capitals.

16. The rationale for taped recordings is based on the following facts:

- (a) They provide a verbatim account of all proceedings;
- (b) They are available almost instantaneously;
- (c) They are uncontestably accurate and reliable;
- (d) They are easily duplicable;
- (e) They are quickly retrievable;
- (f) They involve limited space requirements for storage.

It is pertinent that even précis-writers and some verbatim reporters, in the preparation of written records, rely largely on cassette recordings of the proceedings.

V. STAFFING AND FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

17. The preparation of verbatim records requires four work-days of verbatim reporting per meeting per language, one work-day of revision per meeting per language and four work-days of typing per meeting per language. The cost for a one-week session in 1982 in New York of a body with two daily meetings, for which verbatim records are prepared in all six languages of the General Assembly, is estimated at \$ 204,700 on a full-cost basis.

18. The preparation of summary records requires three work-days of précis-writing per meeting and two work-days of translation per language per meeting. In addition, there will be half a work-day of revision per language per meeting and three work-days of typing per language per meeting.

19. The magnitude of staffing requirements and cost involved in the provision of summary records for the General Assembly alone can be exemplified by the following model calculation based on certain assumptions for staffing requirements which experience has shown to be valid for an average meeting. The production of a single summary record of a Main Committee of the General Assembly requires the services for a full day of 13 translators (3 to prepare the précis, and 10 to translate it into each of the other five official languages) and a total of 3 days of revision. Thus, the 354 summary records produced during the thirty-fifth session required 4,602 staff-days, or about 22 years, of translator time. During 1980 as a whole, 676 summary records were produced at Headquarters and required approximately 31 years of translator time. It also required 43 years of typing time and represented about 6 per cent of the total production of the reproduction shop. Applying average yearly staff costs for translators and typists, these elements alone would cost \$2,466,000, amounting to an average cost of some \$3,648 per summary record. Obviously, there are further indirect costs associated with its production, such as supervision, editing, distribution and issuance of corrigenda. Such indirect and overhead costs were estimated, in 1975, at some 25 per cent of the direct costs (A/C.5/1670, para.4).

20. If the usual technique of full-cost budgeting, which assumes that all staff required would have to be recruited on a free-lance basis, were applied, the cost for the production of a single summary record would be considerably higher than the total average cost indicated above.

21. Tape recordings require one-time investments in recording and listening equipment, both for the Secretariat and for potential users (e.g. missions and foreign ministries). In addition, there would be the cost for the cassettes and reels required to sustain the operation. In general, however, arrangements for tape recording at the Secretariat level are by far less staff-intensive than the methods used to provide written records.

22. At present time, the sound recording facilities of the Office of General Services are situated in one central recording room from which proceedings in all conference rooms at Headquarters can be taped. This central recording room is equipped with some 12 reel recorders and 6 cassette recorders. Throughout 1981 until now, the Office of General Services has purchased for archival recording and purposes of substantive secretariat units and the Department of Conference Services, excluding the needs of the Department for Public Information, some 5000 cassettes, with both 30 and 22 minutes recording time, and 1200 reels with 120 minutes recording time. At an estimated average cost of \$ 1.24 per cassette and \$ 8.01 per reel, this would amount to a cost in the magnitude of \$ 15,000. These recording operations require the services of 3 staff members in the Office of General Services. In addition, the Department of Conference Services maintains its own recording operation for purposes of the Verbatim Reporting Section, requiring 3 staff members and some 160,000 cassettes of 20 minutes recording time per year.

VI. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

23. While no difficulty normally arises in the preparation and timely issue of verbatim records in all languages, considerable delays are often encountered in regard to the issue of summary records in all official languages. Consequently, a situation has developed where the functions of summary records as described above have been lost to an increasing extent. This has been owing to the fact that, faced with an increasing workload, the documentation services have had to assign higher priority to the processing of parliamentary documents, including pre-session and in-session documentation, in order to avoid hampering the work of intergovernmental bodies. Summary records have been processed with any capacity available after parliamentary documentation requirements have been met.

24. Another aspect of the production of summary records pertains to the quality of the summaries and to the selection of the staff required for précis-writing. As summaries of a mediocre quality are of little or no utility, the preparation of such records warrants the assignment of the most experienced and knowledgeable staff available. The Secretariat faces a difficult choice as it might also be argued that high-calibre staff should rather translate documents intended for deliberation by intergovernmental bodies. But even if precedence were to be given to the production of summary records of high quality, the fact remains that summaries, even the best possible, may by their very nature omit to convey the finer points contained in a statement. Complaints about summary records, to the effect that they allegedly "interpret" rather than "record" interventions, surface from time to time.

25. The assignment of précis-writing staff to a meeting reduces at the same time the available translation capacity of the Secretariat. Frequently bodies entitled to summary records start their meetings very late and use only a fraction of the meeting time allotted. This inevitably entails an uneconomical use of staff.

26. On the other hand, tape recordings might suffer from inaccuracies or lack of precision in the case of the languages into which the original is interpreted and thus might not represent the authentic record desired. Tape recordings also effectively prevent editing or the incorporation of corrections in all languages.

VII. ALTERNATIVES

27. It is questionable whether it is really necessary to provide a written record to any subsidiary body of the General Assembly, considering that its real function should be to assist the Assembly in finding solutions on specific subjects. The existence of a public record may even be an obstacle to an effective solution-finding process, which normally involves complex negotiations and bargaining. Moreover, the question may be put whether it would not be appropriate to consider stricter limitations to the present entitlements in view of the substantial financial resources consumed by the production of written meeting records. In that connexion, it may be observed that the cost of producing one page of a summary record surpasses the per capita income of any least developed country.

28. As regards the procedure for the preparation of verbatim records and the entitlements to such records, not many changes have occurred over the past decade. Recently, however, the Joint Inspection Unit recommended that the possibility of adopting a system of multilingual verbatim records be explored. In that connexion, three forms of multilingual verbatim records differing from those currently prepared in the United Nations were mentioned:

(a) The immediate issue of the verbatim records, containing each intervention in the official language in which it was made, followed by final versions in each language after translation;

(b) A single multilingual verbatim record in which interventions in either English or French are recorded only in the language of the speaker, while interventions in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are recorded in the language of the speaker, followed by a translation into either English or French;

(c) The issue of trilingual records (English, French and Spanish), both in provisional and final form.

29. It may be doubted whether one or the other of the above-mentioned multilingual systems would be acceptable to the States Members of the United Nations. It does not appear to be realistic to expect that all main organs now entitled to verbatim records (the Security Council, the General Assembly and its First Committee, and the Trusteeship Council) would agree that the present fully satisfactory system should be replaced by a more complicated and less convenient one. Moreover, even if the General Assembly were to decide that a particular multilingual system should be adopted for itself and its subsidiary organs there is unlikely to be any financial gain. For the production of each type of multilingual record mentioned the present verbatim reporting staff would have to be retained for all official languages, while there would be the additional need for translation and typing of such records into certain other languages. It is very likely that such a procedure would prevent the issue of multilingual verbatim records the day following a meeting as is the present requirement for the Security Council. One may therefore wonder whether the selectivity inherent in a multilingual system and the expected delays in the circulation of such records would be an improvement over the present practice, apart from the question whether or not a multilingual record would prove to be of much practical use for many delegations in their day-to-day work. Accordingly, the Secretariat believes that the suggestion of a multilingual verbatim record should not be further pursued.

30. Contrary to the entitlements for verbatim records, where a reduction in entitlements would not yield many savings, given the need for a permanent Verbatim Reporting Section, it might be arguable whether summary records are indeed indispensable to the point that they warrant the significant expenditure which is required to ensure satisfactory service, although they have indisputably played a useful role in the activities of the Organization. A more restrictive policy with regard to such summary records might very well prove to be less costly and might lead to an improvement in the delivery of other documentation. At the outset, it may be assumed that, given the protracted effort in the past to limit entitlements to summary records of its subsidiary bodies, the General Assembly might not be amenable to a change in the present arrangements for its Main Committees and the General Committee. While it is difficult to pass judgement on the utility of summary records for a particular subsidiary body, the absence of summary records for virtually all subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly in 1980 did not result in claims that the efficiency or effectiveness of the proceedings of the bodies concerned had been hampered or had caused a discernible loss in the efficiency of subsequent sessions of the General Assembly - although the period might have been too short to allow a thorough analysis in the case of some of the bodies for which summary records were reinstated as of 1981. Nevertheless, and in the light of the experience of the Economic and Social Council, the Secretariat believes that a case can be made for the adoption of a more restrictive policy with respect to the provision of summary records.

31. Any future policy governing the provision of summary records should be guided by the criterion that the operations and the conduct of business of bodies presently entitled to summary records should not be adversely affected by their possible suspension. It should be ensured that alternative ways can be found to satisfy the needs and concerns of delegations. In that connexion, it may be possible to consider the substitution of summary records by an increased use of sound recordings of the proceedings, a procedure which the General Assembly had already endorsed in 1975, supplemented by an expanded coverage and improved accessibility to tapes for delegations.

32. Such an approach might result in an increased workload for some substantive servicing units inasmuch as, in order to be able to prepare an analysis of the discussion for inclusion in a particular body's report, they would have to follow more closely statements made during a particular meeting or to listen to tapes. But such adjustments in the Secretariat's work style might have already taken place in the case of sessions of bodies now receiving summary records, taking into account the delays which have been experienced in issuing such records. Moreover, it may be argued that such demands have obviously been met by the secretariats of the subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council and those subsidiary organs of the General Assembly for which the provision of summary records remained discontinued beyond 1980. In reality, most Secretariat units, particularly of bodies never provided with any form of written record, have for many years successfully relied on sound recordings of meetings and eventual transcripts thereof prepared by the staff of the substantive units.

33. Accordingly, the Committee on Conferences might wish to consider recommending to the General Assembly that the provision of summary records be restricted to the International Law Commission and those subsidiary bodies which were explicitly requested by the General Assembly at the immediately preceding session to begin or continue the drafting of international conventions and legal instruments; to bodies performing quasi-legal functions, such as the United Nations Council for Namibia; to regular and special sessions of governing bodies of certain United Nations programmes and organs; to pledging conferences and meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions by Member States; to the Main Committees (except the First Committee) and the General Committee of the General Assembly; and to special conferences currently entitled to summary records, as well as future legal codification conferences.

34. Such a policy should be restricted to an experimental period of three years in order to allow a full assessment of the impact on the work of the subsidiary bodies which would no longer receive summary records. For the duration of this trial period the reporting system of the bodies concerned should be adjusted with a view to reflecting fully the essence of substantive and procedural discussions, bearing in mind, however, the desirability of limiting such reports to 32 pages, as requested by the General Assembly. Moreover, the Committee on Conferences may consider recommending to the General Assembly that all bodies which will continue to be provided with summary records should abide by the 32-page rule for their reports to the Assembly and avoid a full and detailed account of discussions by referring instead to the summary records involved.

35. The Committee on Conferences may further wish to recommend to the General Assembly that, following its recommendation in 1975, a formal rule now be adopted to the effect that, with the exception of the International Law Commission, subsidiary bodies otherwise entitled to receive meeting records for all or some of their meetings should not receive them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres. The Secretariat suggests this course of action as the provision of summary records in the normal manner in such circumstances entails the dispatch of a considerable number of translators, revisers and typists, usually at considerable expense to a host country or, in exceptional cases, to the regular budget of the United Nations. In addition to the cost factor, the absence from their headquarters of a large complement of staff usually involves a significant degree of administrative disruption and retards the usual flow of work, as such staff would not be available for other assignments in case the body concerned held fewer meetings than envisaged. Taking these factors into account, arrangements have been made, on occasion, to tape the proceedings so that the relevant summary records could be prepared on the basis of such recordings upon return to headquarters. However, this procedure has proved to be time-consuming, inefficient and beset by practical difficulties.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

36. Accordingly, the Committee on Conferences may wish to consider recommending the following draft resolution to the General Assembly which would contain a consolidation of the present and proposed policy with respect to the provision of meeting records to the Assembly's subsidiary bodies:

The General Assembly

Recalling its resolutions 2292(XXII) of 8 December 1967, 2538(XXIV) of 11 December 1969, 3415(XXX) of 8 December 1975, 34/50 of 23 November 1979, 35/10 B of 3 November 1980 and 36/117 A of 10 December 1981,

Mindful of the action taken by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1979/69 and its decision 1982/105,

1. Reaffirms that no United Nations body or organ shall have both verbatim and summary records for the same meeting;

2. Confirms the present arrangements in the provision of meeting records for itself, its Main Committees and the General Committee;

3. Further decides that no present or future subsidiary body of the General Assembly shall be entitled to summary records with the exception of

(a) The International Law Commission;

(b) Subsidiary bodies explicitly requested by the Assembly at its immediately preceding session to begin or continue the drafting of international conventions and legal instruments;

(c) Subsidiary bodies performing quasi-legal functions;

and that such an exception shall not apply to any of their subsidiary bodies;

4. Agrees that summary records shall continue to be provided to regular and special sessions of governing bodies of those United Nations organs and programmes contained in paragraph 1 of the annex to this resolution, and to pledging conferences or meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions by Member States and determines that this entitlement shall not extend to any of their subsidiary bodies;

5. Resolves that any further exception shall require the Assembly's explicit approval in a pertinent resolution or decision;

6. Confirms that summary records shall not be provided to special conferences and their preparatory organs, with the exception of legal codification conferences, for which the needs will be determined in each case;

7. Requests the Secretary-General to arrange for the taping, in all languages, of all proceedings of those bodies no longer entitled to meeting records in accordance with the present resolution, so that such tapes may be made available to interested delegations in accordance with the established practices of the Secretariat;

8. Requests all its subsidiary bodies entitled to written meeting records to keep their requirements for such records to a reasonable minimum, and to dispense with them, whenever possible, and to make wider use of tape recordings of meetings;

9. Decides that subsidiary bodies which are otherwise entitled to receive meeting records for all or some of their meetings shall not receive them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres;

10. Confirms the present entitlements for verbatim records of its subsidiary bodies as set out in paragraph 2 of the annex to this resolution and reiterates that no subsidiary body shall be entitled to receive verbatim records unless the General Assembly has explicitly so approved in a relevant resolution;

11. Instructs its subsidiary bodies that continue to be entitled to written meeting records to keep their reports within the desirable limit of 32 pages and to avoid a full and detailed account of discussions by referring instead to the relevant meeting records.

ANNEX

1. The following governing bodies of United Nations organs and programmes are entitled to receive summary records:

- (a) Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD;
- (b) Industrial Development Board of UNIDO;
- (c) Executive Board of UNICEF;
- (d) Governing Council of UNDP;
- (e) Board of Trustees of UNITAR;
- (f) Executive Committee of UNHCR.

2. The following subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly are entitled to receive verbatim records:

- (a) Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space;
- (b) Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples;
- (c) Disarmament Commission;
- (d) United Nations Administrative Tribunal (when holding hearings, only in the language of the speaker);
- (e) Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories (when hearing witnesses);
- (f) Committee on Disarmament (the Committee receives verbatim records from full statements as delivered and checked by delegations concerned but without the use of verbatim reporters);
- (g) Meetings of subsidiary bodies held in observance of international days of solidarity proclaimed by the General Assembly.