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## PUBLICATIONS AND DOCUMENTATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

### Programme of recurrent publications

#### Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions to the General Assembly at its twenty-seventh session

#### I. Introduction

1. In a report to the General Assembly at its twenty-sixth session, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions submitted some preliminary observations (A/8624) on the report by Inspector Robert M. Macy of the Joint Inspection Unit on the programme of recurrent publications of the United Nations (A/8362). In the light of that report, the General Assembly asked the intergovernmental bodies concerned to consider those recommendations of the Inspector that were addressed to specific publications, and to transmit their observations, through the Economic and Social Council, where appropriate, to the General Assembly in time for consideration at its twenty-seventh session (resolution 2886 (XXVI)).

2. The Secretary-General's report on developments in the past 12 months (A/8851) deals separately with (a) legal publications and (b) economic, social and human rights publications. At the twenty-sixth session of the Assembly, the Sixth Committee commented on the Inspector's recommendations to terminate or modify a number of legal publications and, in his report, the Secretary-General has raised the administrative and financial implications of certain options arising from some of its suggestions. Those options were reviewed by the Sixth Committee at the current session of the Assembly and are the subject of observations and recommendations forwarded to the Fifth Committee (A/C.5/1480). 1/ The status of the Inspector's recommendations on economic, social and human rights publications is somewhat different. These were duly referred by the Economic and Social Council to the intergovernmental bodies scheduled to meet in the first half of 1972, and the Council considered their observations at its fifty-third session, along with

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1/ Letter of 27 November 1972 from the Chairman of the Sixth Committee to the Chairman of the Fifth Committee. The Advisory Committee has submitted a separate report on the administrative and financial implications of the Sixth Committee's conclusions on the United Nations Treaty Series (A/8708/Add.26).

the Secretary-General's comments on certain recommendations that had not been referred to subsidiary bodies of the Council. The Council's decision (resolution 1713 (LIII)) is analysed in the report of the Secretary-General (A/8851, chap. II).

3. Thus, observations on about half of Inspector Macy's recommendations on specific publications are now before the Assembly, the exceptions being those which could not be referred to the appropriate intergovernmental bodies in the first half of 1972, 2/ and those which the Economic and Social Council instructed its subsidiary bodies to consider further. 3/ The General Assembly may wish to allow more time for the views of the subsidiary bodies to be taken into account, as recommended by the Council in its resolution 1713 (LIII), paragraph 6; it could consider the relevant recommendations of the Inspector at its twenty-eighth session.

4. The Inspector also made 10 general recommendations on which the Secretary-General submitted observations to the General Assembly last year (A/8540). 4/ In his latest report, the Secretary-General confirms those observations (A/8851, para. 2).

## II. Comments of the Advisory Committee

5. Inspector Macy's report was submitted in response to General Assembly resolution 2732 (XXV), paragraph 4, in which the Assembly invited the Joint Inspection Unit to report on the programme of recurrent United Nations publications "with a view to drawing attention to those which appear to have lost their usefulness or have become redundant or whose value may not measure up to the cost involved in continuing them". The Advisory Committee believes that, in his general recommendations, the Inspector has correctly identified a number of weaknesses in the way recurrent publications are prepared, processed and distributed. At the same time, the Committee is conscious of certain practical problems raised by some recommendations, to which the Secretary-General has called attention in his observations.

6. The Inspector's recommendations on specific publications have found little response in the intergovernmental bodies to which they were referred. Some of those bodies have agreed to modifications to publications along the lines proposed by the Inspector, but in the main their comments tend to endorse the present publications programme and none of the Inspector's recommendations to terminate publications has been accepted. The Advisory Committee accepts the competence of the bodies concerned, which are best placed to judge whether publications relevant to their mandate are serving a useful purpose; but some over-all judgement should also be exercised as to the validity of the publications programme as a whole, in relation

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2/ Recommendations 11 (c)-(g), 12 (h), 12 (i), 12 (l), 12 (q) and 12 (r).

3/ Recommendations 9, 12 (j), 12 (m) and 12 (p).

4/ Some of those observations addressed themselves to recommendation 12 (s) on the Yearbook of the United Nations, which could not be referred to any subsidiary body.

to its cost. The Committee notes that the outcome of the separate reviews by the intergovernmental bodies is not easy to reconcile with the judgement of the General Assembly, implicit in its resolution 2732 (XXV), that some United Nations publications have in time become redundant or may be costing more than they are worth. It should be recognized that the intergovernmental bodies were at a disadvantage in trying to relate the usefulness of individual publications to the costs of producing them, since it is impossible to determine from the United Nations budget in its present form what those costs are. Whereas the cost of printing most publications is shown in section 11 (Printing), costs of authorship, copy preparation and translation are not revealed in the budget and are indeed not known, since they are not the subject of any cost-accounting procedure. The Advisory Committee believes that the new form of presentation of the budget recommended by the Fifth Committee will, when it is developed and refined, provide much more information than hitherto to Member States on the cost of individual publications. The Committee hopes that intergovernmental bodies will take that information into account when formulating the work programmes of the Secretariat in their respective fields of competence. The Secretary-General himself has drawn attention to the importance of relating the objectives of the publications programme to its cost (A/8851, para. 5).

7. An important factor in the cost of publications, particularly those which are translated, is their length. In response to General Assembly resolution 2836 (XXVI), which called for a reduction of 15 per cent in the volume of documentation originating in the Secretariat other than meetings records, the Secretary-General has taken steps through the Publications Board to reduce the length of a number of United Nations recurrent publications. The Advisory Committee intends to review this matter in the light of the report that the Secretary-General is to submit to the General Assembly at its twenty-eighth session on implementation of that resolution.

8. In paragraphs 9 to 19 below, the Advisory Committee offers its observations on the 10 general recommendations of Inspector Macy, bearing in mind the Secretary-General's related comments (A/8540), and, in paragraphs 20 to 22, it comments on the specific recommendations in the light of the views expressed by the intergovernmental bodies concerned.

(a) General recommendations of the Inspector (recommendations 1 to 10)

9. The Secretary-General has dealt with recommendation 1 of the Inspector, to the effect that the General Assembly clarify responsibility for authorizing recurrent publications, in the context of recommendations 11 and 12, which address themselves to specific titles. In the view of the Advisory Committee, that responsibility rests in the first instance with the intergovernmental bodies concerned with establishing the various sectoral work programmes of the Organization. Their decisions should, however, be subject to review by the Economic and Social Council in the case of economic, social and human rights publications, and by the General Assembly in the case of others, should those bodies so decide. In all cases, the General Assembly has the authority to deny the funds required for printing a particular recurrent publication, as the Secretary-General has recognized. In the light of paragraph 11 (c) of the Secretary-General's report (A/8540), it would be useful if the titles and costs of all recurrent publications, irrespective of whether it is intended to produce them internally or externally, appeared in the

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Secretary-General's budget estimates. This should become possible under the new form of presentation of the budget (see para. 6 above).

10. The Advisory Committee agrees with the Secretary-General that it might be difficult for him to comply fully with recommendation 2, which calls for the distribution of every recurrent publication before the end of the next time period. However, it notes the undertaking given that the Publications Board will take steps to accelerate their issue. The Committee believes that the Inspector is correct in emphasizing the need for a sense of urgency in producing material of this type, particularly at the drafting stage. Recurrent publications which reach readers long after the period which they cover has elapsed are likely to be of historical interest only, and not worth the money they cost.

11. The Secretary-General points out that institutional arrangements exist to control the quantity and quality of recurrent publications, which is the aim sought by the Inspector's recommendations 3 (a) and (b). However, the Inspector's finding (A/8362, para. 21) that all of the organizational units of the United Nations are "trying to carry out larger publication programmes than they have the capacity to control" suggests that the existing procedures need improving.

12. The Secretary-General intends to follow up recommendation 4, which deals with the costing and budgetary presentation of internal reproduction activities. The Advisory Committee agrees with the Inspector as to the merit of indicating in the budget not only the cost of such activities, but indeed all costs related to publications (see para. 6 above). With regard to recommendation 5, the Advisory Committee recommends that there be no expansion of internal reproduction facilities in New York, Geneva, Vienna or the headquarters of the regional economic commissions until the effect of the General Assembly's decision to reduce by 15 per cent documentation originating in the Secretariat (resolution 2836 (XXVI)) has been assessed.

13. In the Advisory Committee's view, there is merit in the Inspector's recommendation 6 that certain publications primarily of interest to scholars be discontinued. The Secretary-General has not specifically replied to recommendation 6 (a). This recommendation is related to recommendation 2 and the Advisory Committee notes the Secretary-General's assurance that the Publications Board will take it into account, along with recommendation 6 (b).

14. The Secretary-General expresses reservations about recommendation 7, according to which publications which cover the proceedings of meetings and seminars should include only summaries of speeches and papers. While it is true that it takes time (and thus money) to summarize a text, it is also true that it takes more time to read a long printed text than a short one; publications should try to satisfy the needs of their readers, who are likely to favour conciseness. Moreover, the Secretary-General does not seem to have taken fully into account the costs of translation, typing and editing, which normally vary according to the length of the material. For these reasons, the Advisory Committee recommends that recommendation 7 be implemented.

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15. The Secretary-General has undertaken to implement recommendation 8, which is intended to ensure that recurrent publications are sent only to recipients who have a genuine use for them.

16. Recommendation 9 of the Inspector, which proposes a programme to reduce duplication of effort in collecting, processing, storing and publishing statistics, was considered in 1972 by a Working Group of the Statistical Commission. The Working Group prepared some preliminary comments on the recommendation, which were generally not favourable; however, it agreed with the Inspector that any duplication that existed in the collection of statistics from Governments should be eliminated, that ways should be sought to improve the timeliness of United Nations statistical publications and that duplication existed in the collection and processing of data within some of the specialized agencies and between the United Nations system and other international organizations (E/L.1498). At its fifty-third session, the Economic and Social Council referred recommendation 9 to the Statistical Commission as an item of high priority (resolution 1713 (LIII)).

17. The Advisory Committee will return to recommendation 10, which suggests a reduction in the publications programme of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), in the light of the comments of the Industrial Development Board on chapter VIII of Inspector Macy's report (A/8362).

18. In paragraphs 35 to 39 of his report, Inspector Macy raises the question whether the sales policy for United Nations publications might be oriented more towards sales for profit. The Advisory Committee recalls that, in its first report on the budget estimates for 1971, it suggested a thorough review of pricing policy. 5/ A review was indeed carried out and, as a result, the prices of some publications have been raised. 6/

19. Should the General Assembly endorse the Advisory Committee's observations above on the Inspector's recommendations 6, 7 and 8, the cost of the United Nations programme of recurrent publications will be reduced. Since it is not possible at this stage to estimate the amount that might be saved, the Committee is not recommending a reduction in the appropriations for 1973. However, it will bear its conclusions in mind when considering the Secretary-General's estimates for recurrent publications in 1974-1975 and subsequent biennia.

(b) Recommendations of the Inspector on specific publications (recommendations 11 and 12)

20. The Committee regrets that the Yearbook of the United Nations, which is the subject of recommendation 12 (s), was not included in the user survey described in chapter II of the Inspector's report. While this publication is expensive, the Advisory Committee believes that it satisfies a proved demand for an authoritative,

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5/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 8 (A/8008), para. 398.

6/ Ibid., Twenty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 8 (A/8408 and Corr.1 and 2), para. 334.

compact, indexed reference work on the activities of the Organization. The Committee tends to agree with the Secretary-General that some of its usefulness might be lost were the Inspector's recommendation to be followed. Nevertheless, the time-lag in the production of the Yearbook is excessive; to correct that situation, the Advisory Committee, in 1970, agreed to a recommendation by the Secretary-General, based on the findings of the Administrative Management Service that temporary assistance for preparing the Yearbook be increased. 7/ In its resolution 2897 (XXVI) the General Assembly, among other things, endorsed the Secretary-General's proposal that publication of the Yearbook be continued (A/C.5/1320/Rev.1, para. 261 (iii)).

21. The Advisory Committee has referred above in general terms to those observations which have so far been submitted by intergovernmental bodies on the other more specific recommendations of the Inspector. The Committee is pleased to note that, in its most recent review of legal publications, the Sixth Committee did not press for the preparation of indices for two publications (the United Nations Juridical Yearbook and the Reports of International Arbitral Awards) in view of the cost involved and the Organization's financial difficulties (A/C.5/1480 and A/8851, chap. I). A small annual saving will accrue from the Sixth Committee's decision to modify the contents of the Yearbook. 8/ As a result of its review of this publication, the Secretary-General has undertaken to accelerate considerably publication of the French, Russian and Spanish versions within existing resources (A/8851, para. 9 (c)).

22. The Advisory Committee does not believe that the observations of intergovernmental bodies on economic, social and human rights publications, which have been endorsed by the Economic and Social Council and are summarized in the report of the Secretary-General (A/8851, chap. II), call for detailed comments on its part. In general terms, the observations constitute an endorsement of the present content and periodicity of the publications concerned. However, some changes have been agreed to. In the Advisory Committee's view, these will result in budgetary savings in future years, though no estimates of their size has yet been made. The Advisory Committee intends to pursue this matter next year, when it should have before it the observations of the competent organs on the balance of the publications which were the subject of recommendations of the Inspector.

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7/ Ibid., Twenty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 8A (A/8008/Add.1-15), document A/8008/Add.4, para. 37 (c).

8/ The annual saving, estimated at \$6,200, has been taken into account in the Advisory Committee's recommendation for additional appropriations for the United Nations Treaty Series (A/8708/Add.26).