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ESCAP REFORM

(Item 6 (b) of the provisional agenda)

**IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMISSION RESOLUTION 58/1: FINAL REVIEW
OF THE REVISED CONFERENCE STRUCTURE**

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

The present document provides an overview of key issues related to the review of the conference structure, including views on the functioning of the conference structure expressed by member States through consultations and surveys as well as an analysis of attendance by Governments at meetings under the conference structure.

Pursuant to resolution 58/1 of 22 May 2002, the Commission is requested to undertake a review of its conference structure, including its thematic and sectoral priorities and its subsidiary structure, taking into account the outcome of the mid-term review of the conference structure, which was carried out by the Commission in 2005.

In resolution 58/1, the Commission instituted a new conference structure prioritizing the themes of poverty reduction, managing globalization and emerging social issues. The changes sought to address concerns regarding the focus and relevance of the Commission in relation to the needs and priorities of member States, and realigned the conference structure with the programme structure. At its sixty-first session, in 2005, the Commission reviewed the effectiveness of the conference structure and, by resolution 61/1 of 18 May 2005, decided to fine-tune it by discontinuing the eight sectoral subcommittees established pursuant to resolution 58/1.

A working group under the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission (ACPR) was established in January 2007 to prepare for the Commission's review of the conference structure. The Commission is invited to take into account the outcome of that working group in its review of the conference structure.

Background

1. The conference structure forms the basis for the functioning of the Commission and reflects the needs and priorities of its membership. It is thus the main oversight mechanism for ensuring that the work of the Commission is owned and driven by member States.

2. Responding to a concern that the existing conference structure needed revitalization, especially following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration,¹ the Commission adopted resolution 58/1 of 22 May 2002 on restructuring the conference structure of the Commission, whereby of established three thematic committees, on poverty reduction, managing globalization and emerging social issues. To balance the thematic approach, it also established eight sectoral subcommittees to sharpen the focus of the work of ESCAP. The changes were instituted in order to (a) adapt to the changing regional environment; (b) strengthen the regional convening function of ESCAP; (c) refocus and rationalize the work of ESCAP; and (d) increase the relevance of the work of ESCAP to its membership. The revised conference structure came into effect on 1 January 2003.

3. A mid-term review carried out in 2005 revealed a pronounced sense that the number of intergovernmental meetings had become too high and that the frequency of meetings diminished the importance of each session. Furthermore, the membership welcomed more opportunities for interactive exchanges of ideas and experiences, somewhat less constrained by time limits during sessions and legislative requirements. Attendance from capitals, generally seen as an indicator of the interest of Governments, did not appear to have increased significantly with the changes instituted by resolution 58/1. Based on the review, and, bearing in mind reservations expressed concerning any major changes at the mid-term review point, the Commission, in its resolution 61/1 of 18 May 2005 on the mid-term review concerning the functioning of the conference structure of the Commission, decided to fine-tune the conference structure by discontinuing the sectoral subcommittees while increasing the frequency of sessions of the thematic committees from biennial to annual. The adjustments came into effect on 1 January 2006.

4. The present conference structure has now been in place for five years, and reflection and analysis of its functioning seems timely, not least in the context of the ongoing reform of the United Nations at the global level. Furthermore, resolution 58/1 requires that the conference structure of the Commission, including its thematic and sectoral priorities and subsidiary structure, taking into account the mid-term review of 2005, be reviewed by the Commission no later than at its sixty-third session, in 2007. The present document provides an assessment of the conference structure, consolidating views and experiences expressed by the membership of ESCAP, which has indicated a commitment to further strengthening the intergovernmental review process to ensure that it delivers concrete outcomes.

¹ See General Assembly resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000.

I. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE REFORM OF ESCAP

5. The Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission (ACPR) discussed the reform of the United Nations in general and of ESCAP in particular at its retreat in November 2006. An agreement emerged on the following guiding principles for the reform of ESCAP: (a) reform should be in line with the reform efforts of the United Nations system as a whole; and (b) the needs and demands of member States should be the main underlying guiding principle for reform, ensuring continued ownership of ESCAP by its members. In that regard, there should be a focus on supporting member States, particularly least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and Pacific island developing States, in their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

II. FUNCTIONING OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE

6. As a follow-up to the external evaluation of ESCAP, the secretariat in October 2006 conducted a survey among members and associate members of ESCAP on the conference structure. The following trends can be discerned from the feedback received through questionnaires and subsequent consultations during the ACPR retreat: (a) in general, the membership favoured a continuation of a more focused thematic structure, which would enable discussions to be focused around sectors, in particular to facilitate the participation of representatives of Governments; (b) with regard to the organization of sessions of the Commission, it was suggested that country statements during the ministerial segment should be limited to summaries, with circulation of full text statements to ensure that the Commission would complete its work in an effective and efficient manner. It was also suggested that the number of committees of the whole could be reduced to allow smaller delegations to participate in the various sessions; and (c) further, on the preparation for sessions of the Commission, the early involvement of ACPR in the review of draft resolutions was seen as a necessary measure to facilitate the review process during Commission sessions.

The three thematic committees

7. The three thematic committees met in 2006 pursuant to Commission resolution 61/1. Evaluation questionnaires, circulated and completed by attending delegations at sessions of all three committees, revealed the following common issues: (a) in general, delegations were satisfied with the benefits of policy deliberations during committee sessions and the servicing by the secretariat; (b) there was a repeated call for timely issuance of documents to allow for consultations with capitals prior to the sessions; and (c) the need to consider options for increasing the participation of representatives from capitals was stressed.

8. Suggested measures to this end included (a) a more focused agenda; (b) support for participation of representatives from least developed countries; (c) the organization of back-to-back meetings; and (d) improved coordination and preparation.

1. *Committee on Managing Globalization (Parts I and II)*

9. With particular reference to the Committee on Globalization,² the recommendations of attending delegations were: (a) to focus the agenda to avoid dealing with too many subjects in too general a manner; (b) to ensure that meeting reports reflected discussions rather than secretariat positions; and (c) to consider changing the nature of the sessions towards decision-making and information exchange rather than workshop-like discussions and information provision.

2. *Committee on Poverty Reduction*

10. Attending delegations put forward the following specific recommendations to improve future sessions of the Committee on Poverty Reduction: (a) focus the agenda on policies, programmes and projects with significant impact on poverty reduction, and allow for more in-depth discussion on solutions and action plans; (b) consider separate coverage of issues pertaining to poverty reduction and statistics, respectively; and (c) consider restoration of the Committee on Statistics.

3. *Committee on Emerging Social Issues*

11. Feedback from the evaluation survey included the following specific recommendations to enhance the functioning of the Committee on Emerging Social Issues: (a) link the issues covered in pre-session documents with the programme of work of ESCAP; (b) introduce a biennial work programme for the Committee, covering alternate issues in alternate years; and (c) enhance collaboration on emerging social issues with other United Nations entities.

**III. ATTENDANCE BY GOVERNMENTS AT MEETINGS HELD UNDER
THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE**

12. The mid-term review of the conference structure in 2005 was carried out, inter alia, to respond to concerns expressed by member States regarding attendance from capitals at meetings held under the conference structure of the Commission. The following review covers attendance by government representatives at meetings organized pursuant to resolution 58/1, that is, during the period 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2006. In addition to providing an overview of attendance, it analyses the effects of the changes on the attendance of Governments at meetings of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, as instituted through resolution 61/1.

13. The tables contained in the annex to the present document contain statistics pertaining to attendance at meetings held under the conference structure from 2003 to 2006, including the number of meetings (table 1), attendance by delegates (table 2), attendance from capitals (table 3) and attendance by countries (table 4).

² The Committee on Managing Globalization encompasses Part I, focusing on international trade and investment and transport infrastructure and facilitation and tourism, and Part II, focusing on information, communication and space technology, and environment and sustainable development.

A. Overview of attendance

14. The two special bodies, the three thematic committees, and the eight subcommittees all met at least once during the period under review, amounting to a total of 26 intergovernmental meetings during four years (cf. table 1).

15. More than 3,000 government representatives attended meetings under the conference structure of ESCAP from 2003 to 2006. On average, 119 delegates from 27 countries attended each meeting (cf. tables 2 and 4). Thus, at any given conference of the Commission, the likelihood was that just under half (44 per cent) of its members would be in attendance.³

16. Almost half the delegates (49 per cent) had travelled from their respective capitals to attend the meetings (cf. table 3).

B. Implications of changes instituted through resolution 61/1

17. Attendance at meetings held during the period 2003-2006 was stable with a slight but rather inconclusive downward trend. While in 2003 each meeting was attended by an average number of 137 delegates, the same figure for 2006 was 124. Similarly, while an average of 32 countries were represented at each meeting held in 2003, 27 countries were represented at meetings held in 2006.

18. Focusing on attendance from capitals, in 2003 an average of 73 delegates had travelled from overseas to attend a meeting under the conference structure, while in 2006 the figure was 56. The data do not indicate a trend, however, as average attendance from capitals had dropped to 53 in 2004.

19. Comparing the attendance data for the years 2005 and 2006, that is, the years immediately before and after resolution 61/1 came into effect, yields similar although even less conclusive results.

20. The thematic committees underwent the most significant change pursuant to resolution 61/1 as the sectoral subcommittees were subsumed under them, and the frequency of sessions was increased from biennial to annual. The sessions held in 2006, when compared with sessions held in 2003 and 2005, were attended by fewer delegates and fewer countries. Attendance from capitals was also lower in 2006 than in 2003 and 2005 (an average of 27 compared with 65 in 2003 and 35 in 2005). However, the average attendance by delegates at the 2006 sessions was significantly higher than the attendance at the subcommittee sessions held in 2004.

21. Overall, it can be concluded that the changes introduced through resolution 61/1 have had no discernible positive impact on attendance at meetings held under the conference structure of the Commission. However, the discontinuation of the eight sectoral subcommittees seems justified in view to the comparatively low attendance by delegates and countries in general, and from capitals in particular, to the subcommittee sessions held in 2004.

³ The total number of members and associate members of the Commission is 62.

IV. SUMMARY CONCERNS AND KEY ISSUES RELATED TO THE REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE

22. Together with the results of the mid-term review, the above views and analysis on the functioning of the conference structure can be summarized into the following key concerns and issues:

(a) Revisions to the conference structure should bear in mind the reform efforts of the United Nations system as a whole, with responsiveness to the needs and priorities of member States being its main, underlying principle;

(b) The membership has indicated a preference for a continuation of either a more focused thematic structure or a sectoral orientation;

(c) The membership has highlighted the need to enhance the focus of the agenda for Committee sessions in order to support in-depth discussions with concrete outcomes and facilitate the nomination of representatives by governments;

(d) Attendance by Governments at meetings under the conference structure does not appear to have increased with the measures introduced through resolution 61/1.

V. CONCLUSION

23. The above review of the functioning of the conference structure is based on the views and experiences of the ESCAP membership. It points to the need to change the way that the Commission and its secretariat “do business.” Members need to rediscover their ownership of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies as their forum for policy dialogue on issues of common concern. The secretariat needs to continue its reform, under the guidance of the Commission, to enhance the relevance and impact of its work in terms of concrete outcomes that benefit member States. Together, the Commission and the secretariat can transform ESCAP into a dynamic regional institution that truly mirrors the vibrancy of the Asian and Pacific region.

Annex

**ATTENDANCE STATISTICS FOR MEETINGS HELD UNDER THE
CONFERENCE STRUCTURE, 2003-2006^a**

Table 1. Number of meetings

	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Commission	1	1	1	1	4
Special bodies	1	1	1	1	4
Committees	3	0	3	4 ^b	10
Subcommittees	0	8	0	0	8
Total	5	10	5	6	26

Table 2. Attendance by delegates (number of delegates, average per meeting)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	All years
Commission	313	444	348	359	366
Special bodies	42	32	29	60	41
Committees	110	-	94	81	94
Subcommittees	-	65	-	-	65
All meetings	137	99	132	124	119

Table 3. Attendance from capitals (number of delegates, average per meeting)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	All years
Commission	141	260	170	188	190
Special bodies	28	27	17	39	28
Committees	65	-	35	27	41
Subcommittees	-	30	-	-	30
All meetings	73	53	59	56	59

^a Tables and figures the present annex include attendance by governments and government representatives from member and associate members of ESCAP only.

^b Pursuant to resolution 61/1 of 18 May 2005 on the mid-term review concerning the functioning of the conference structure of the Commission, parts I and II of the Committee on Managing Globalization met separately in 2006; thus, four committee sessions were held in 2006.

Table 4. Attendance by countries (number of countries, average per meeting)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	All years
Commission	47	55	48	51	50
Special bodies	21	19	18	23	20
Committees	31	-	27	22	26
Subcommittees	-	21	-	-	21
All meetings	32	24	29	27	27

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