



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Forty-sixth Session
OFFICIAL RECORDS

Tuesday, 3 June 1969,
at 3.20 p.m.



CONTENTS

	Page
<i>Agenda item 21:</i>	
<i>Organization of the work of the Council. . . .</i>	1

President: Mr. Raymond SCHEYVEN (Belgium).

AGENDA ITEM 21

Organization of the work of the Council (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2)

1. The PRESIDENT drew the Council's attention to the working paper prepared by the Secretariat (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2), part one of which contained a number of suggestions by the Secretariat intended to assist the Council in its efforts to reduce the number of meetings and the volume of documentation in the economic, social and human rights fields to manageable proportions, and part two of which contained information, supplied at the Council's request, on ways and means of reducing the cost of producing summary records.

2. With regard to suggestion No. 1 (E/L.1249, para. 6) relating to the periodicity of meetings of the functional and regional commissions, several of the subsidiary bodies of the Council which had recently considered the question of the periodicity of their sessions did not agree with the view that they should meet less frequently. Indeed, it was clear from the suggestions that the Secretariat, while deeply concerned by the present situation, was aware that circumstances might require that some bodies should be allowed to continue to meet more often than others. He nevertheless hoped that the Council would find some way of reducing the present excessive number of meetings, which was placing an almost unbearable strain upon delegations, particularly those of the developing countries.

3. Since the Council might not have time to discuss the specific suggestions made by the Secretariat, many of which concerned matters of detail, he suggested that it should hold a preliminary discussion of a general nature on the item. The Council might then refer the suggestions in part one of the working paper prepared by the Secretariat (E/L.1249) and any other proposals made during the discussion to the Co-ordination Committee at the forty-seventh session, with the exception of suggestion No. 21, which could be referred to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination for consideration at its forthcoming meetings in June. The Council might also authorize the Secretary-General to give immediate effect, on an experimental basis, to suggestions Nos. 7, 8 and 20, which concerned either the documentation for the forty-seventh session or the Council's report to the General Assembly, which had to be prepared in

advance. The Council might also come to a decision on the two very minor points raised in paragraphs 2 and 3 of document E/L.1249/Add.2. No other decisions were necessary at the present stage.

4. Mr. HAMBRO (Norway) noted that the suggestions contained in the Secretariat working paper (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2) were not made on the initiative of the Secretariat itself, but rather in response to the concern expressed by the Council. In recommending a reduction in the number of meetings and the volume of documentation, the Secretariat's intention had not been to curtail the Council's activities, but to increase their effectiveness.

5. There was general agreement that something should be done to reduce the increasingly heavy workload of the Council, but when it came to specific proposals to that end, the Council's subsidiary bodies vied with each other in proclaiming the unique importance and merits of their respective fields of interest, without regard for the limited resources available.

6. In any large organization, there was a tendency for organizational arrangements to outlive their usefulness. The task facing the Council was to review its organizational arrangements and to determine whether the calendar of meetings and the volume of documentation could be reduced to proportions where they could usefully contribute to the purposes of the Council rather than wastefully overtax the resources of Member States. In that connexion, it should be pointed out that not only the resources of Member States were sometimes wastefully overtaxed, but also the working resources of the Secretariat.

7. The statements of the Secretary-General and the President of the Economic and Social Council contained in paragraph 7 of the report of the Committee on Conferences to the twenty-third session of the General Assembly^{1/} underscored the seriousness of the problem. Acting on the widespread recognition that the situation had assumed critical proportions, the Committee on Conferences had identified the essential elements of a remedial approach. In the working paper (E/L.1249), the Secretariat had based many of its suggestions on the proposals of the Committee. In his delegation's opinion, it was the duty of the Council to consider those suggestions seriously and in detail.

8. The Council should envisage the possibility of reducing the number of sessions of its subsidiary bodies but it should not take a hasty decision. Much valuable work was done by the dedicated people serving on those bodies and much of the work of the Council was based on their findings. They should be given a reasonable time to conclude work on matters

^{1/} Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-third Session, agenda item 75, document A/7361.

outstanding and to prepare themselves for a reorganization of their working schedule. The Commission for Social Development, for example, should continue to meet annually during the period before the launching of the Second United Nations Development Decade, on the understanding that the matter would be reviewed at a later stage. The Council should not dictate the number of sessions for its subsidiary bodies but should ask them to give serious consideration to the possibility of meeting biennially on the understanding that an extraordinary session might be held if the need should arise.

9. His delegation generally endorsed the suggestions concerning the reduction in the volume of documentation, in particular the last sentence of suggestion No. 5. There was a twofold danger in the proliferation of documentation. On the one hand, delegations often found themselves unable to cope with the vast amount of documentation at meetings of United Nations bodies; on the other hand, the documentation sent by delegations to their Governments, if it was too voluminous, was likely to be filed without being read.

10. His delegation specifically supported suggestion No. 13 and, in that connexion, appealed to the authors of draft resolutions not to include automatically an operative paragraph requesting a report from the Secretary-General on the implementation of the resolution.

11. With regard to summary records, his delegation was of the view that it would be impractical for the Council to lay down absolute rules, but all bodies should be requested to consider the question carefully at the start of every session and to ask for summary records as an exception rather than a rule.

12. Mr. DEBERGH (Belgium) suggested that it would be more appropriate to entitle the working paper "Reorganization of the work of the Council", and in principle favoured the idea of biennial sessions for the functional commissions. However, the Council might decide in exceptional cases that certain bodies should meet annually; the Commission for Social Development, which was preparing for the Second United Nations Development Decade, was a case in point. Perhaps with less frequent session, the Council's subsidiary bodies would avoid sterile discussions and devote themselves to solving technical problems rather than to debating political issues. His delegation suggested that, if the Council should decide in favour of biennial sessions, the terms of office of members of subsidiary bodies which now met annually should be increased from three to four years.

13. Generally speaking, his delegation approved of the idea of dispensing with summary records in the interests of economy. In some cases, however, summary records were definitely needed, as for example, when the Council or one of its subsidiary bodies was considering the adoption of an international instrument.

14. Mr. OLDS (United States of America) said that the item under discussion was of far-reaching importance for the future of the Council and its effectiveness. His delegation endorsed most of the recommendations in the working paper E/L.1249 and

Add.1 and 2), in particular, suggestions Nos. 7, 8, 20 and 21. He hoped that the Council would agree to authorize the Secretary-General to give effect to these suggestions on an experimental basis.

15. Since there was little time left in the present session, a decision on many of the recommendations made in the Secretariat paper would have to be deferred until the forty-seventh session of the Council. He therefore proposed to concentrate on certain broader issues which had to be resolved if the recommendations of the Secretariat were to be given full effect.

16. If the Council hoped ever to be able to develop a rational pattern of meetings and conferences, it should consider the scheduling of its own sessions and meetings first of all. The present pattern of work of the Council was far from rational, concentrated as it was in a few months from May to August and followed by a number of resumed sessions during the fall when the General Assembly was in session and delegations had little time to give adequate attention to additional meetings of the Council.

17. Specifically, he suggested that the first session of the Council each year might be scheduled for up to three weeks, beginning in early February. Its agenda would include housekeeping items, the reports of the World Bank group, recommendations from the General Assembly which required Council action, the organization of work for the year, reports on substantive topics, reports from the Secretary-General and reports of the subsidiary bodies which met in the fall. In the period between 1 March and mid-June, the Council would hold resumed sessions similar to those which were now held during the General Assembly. At the resumed sessions, each of which would ordinarily not last more than two or three days, the Council would discuss reports from its subsidiary bodies which had met in the first part of the year. A resumed session would not be called until the reports of the subsidiary bodies had been in the hands of Governments for at least six weeks and the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination had had an opportunity to comment on the proposed programmes of work. Any report which could not be considered before the early part of June would be postponed until the first session of the Council in the following year.

18. Reports requested from the Secretary-General could as easily be discussed in February as in May, and the reports of the World Bank group could be given more careful consideration during February than they now received at a resumed session during the General Assembly. Furthermore, the proposed rescheduling would shift the series of resumed meetings now held during the Assembly to the period between March and early June when a substantive overlap was not a problem.

19. It had become increasingly evident that the functional commissions did not like to meet as early as January and February in order to have their reports considered at the May session of the Council. If the Council met in that unwanted time, the commissions might return the favour by accepting a biennial schedule.

20. It might be difficult for the Secretariat to prepare substantive reports for a session in February 1970. However, if past experience was any indication, there would be items postponed from the forty-seventh session which could be taken up in February. Once the change-over to the new system was made, it should not be difficult to arrange for reports to be prepared and distributed at the end of the year. By transferring the series of resumed sessions from the fall to the spring, there would be ample time for the distribution of documents and two- or three-day periods could be devoted exclusively to one or two reports of subsidiary bodies.

21. The summer session of the Council would be held for a period of three to four weeks in July in Geneva. It would consider the reports of the regional economic commissions, problems of co-ordination, and the Council's recommendations for General Assembly action. The Secretary-General might open the session by a general statement covering the economic and social activities of the United Nations and focusing the Council's attention on priority problems. The Geneva session should be primarily concerned with problems of co-ordination within the United Nations family. There should be a discussion in depth covering the reports of the specialized agencies and the regional economic commissions, followed by consideration of individual reports in committee. That kind of a discussion and a more detailed review of the regional commissions' work was badly needed.

22. Subject to its future terms of reference, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination should be able to meet on a continuing basis, taking up reports of the subsidiary bodies of the Council as they became available. It should set aside a seven- to ten-day period in early June to consider the reports of the specialized agencies and the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination.

23. Mr. ALLEN (United Kingdom) said that the Belgian proposal for amending the title of the Secretariat working paper (see para. 12 above) was logical. The working paper (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2) was a praiseworthy attempt to meet the Council's desire to reduce the burden of meetings and documentation. It was clear that further discussion on those matters would be necessary at the forty-seventh session to be held in Geneva. Meanwhile, his delegation supported the proposal that suggestions Nos. 7, 8 and 20 should be put into effect immediately on an experimental basis. The main difficulty was that the Council had been attempting to do more in a year than could possibly be done in the time. Until that problem had been solved no firm decisions could be taken concerning the rescheduling of meetings. In that connexion, the proposals for a biennial budget made in its second report by the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies^{2/} should be borne in mind in the reorganization of work. The whole pattern of meetings and programming should be placed on a biennial basis; in that connexion, the Norwegian proposal (see para. 8 above) was valuable. With

regard to suggestion No. 5 he thought that the Council itself might review the periodicity of reports it was called upon to consider. With regard to suggestions Nos. 9 and 10, he considered that the Report the World Social Situation and the biennial report the world population situation should be discussed first by the Commission for Social Development and the Population Commission respectively, so that the recommendations and conclusions of those Commissions could be taken into account when those items came before the Council. His delegation agreed with suggestion No. 13.

24. He wondered whether it would be possible, with a view to avoiding duplication of the discussions at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and in the General Assembly, to discontinue discussion in the Council of such matters as the external financing of economic development.

25. Useful as they were, the suggestions in the working paper constituted piece-meal remedies and were not sufficiently drastic. The Council should carefully consider the interesting proposal put forward by the United States representative (see paras. 14-22 above), which his delegation supported in principle, when the subject was discussed at the forty-seventh session in Geneva. It would also be helpful to know the Secretariat's views regarding the administrative implications of that proposal.

26. He wished to suggest a procedure for reorganizing the work of the spring session in order to avoid overburdening the subsidiary bodies dealing with social and human rights questions, which now had to compress a great deal of work into the early months of the year in order to be able to report to the Council in May. It had in fact been a new departure to hold both Economic and Social Committee meetings simultaneously at the May session. It might be preferable for the first half of the May session to be devoted to meetings of the Economic Committee and the second half to meetings of the Social Committee. While it would mean a longer Council session, it would lighten the burden on the Secretariat services and on the delegations and give the Commission for Social Development and the Secretariat more time to produce reports for the Council.

27. Mr. VIAUD (France) said that, on the whole, the suggestions in the working paper prepared by the Secretariat (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2) were acceptable to his delegation and could be adopted as decisions of the Council. However, the Co-ordination Committee should examine the suggestions further in relation to other problems; it would then be in a better position to make practical proposals.

28. Organizational difficulties had arisen because the expansion of activities and the proliferation of subsidiary bodies had forced the Secretariat and the delegations to adapt to an increasing burden of work. One source of the difficulties was that not all delegations had the same sense of urgency regarding the need to establish priorities, and there was no agreement as to what the essential priorities were. The limited success achieved by the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination showed that first, the activities of the United Nations itself should be

^{2/} Ibid., Twenty-first Session, Annexes, agenda item 80, document A/6343, chap. IV.

streamlined and, secondly, they should be brought into harmony with those of the specialized agencies, a task which might well be more difficult than the first one. Progress would be made at the forty-seventh session, provided that members of the Council approached those problems in a constructive way and accepted the need to streamline its operations.

29. Bearing in mind, secondly, that the Council was the servant of the General Assembly, the Council should try to settle minor questions at its own level, and only refer to the Assembly those problems which needed to be discussed by the full United Nations membership. The problems would not necessarily be the same every year; they would have to be carefully selected. For example, in the current year the Council would have to submit to the General Assembly matters related to the Second United Nations Development Decade and matters related to human rights and other questions of concern to the Third Committee. Other matters could be settled by the Council itself by instructing its subsidiary bodies or making recommendations to Member States.

30. With regard to the organization of Council sessions, his delegation favoured a formula which was even more drastic than that suggested by the United Kingdom representative (see para. 26 above). The spring session would be essentially "social", covering matters of concern to the Third Committee; the Economic Committee would not meet at all. The July session would be mainly devoted to economic and co-ordination problems, which was logical as the specialized agencies were often represented at that session by the heads of their secretariats. Furthermore, any resumed summer session during the General Assembly period should be confined to a discussion of purely administrative questions and should never deal with problems of substance. In 1968, the Council had encroached on the time of the Second Committee to the detriment of both organs. If some problems of substance were not settled, they should be deferred until the following year.

31. In conclusion, he stressed that the Economic and Social Council bore primary responsibility for co-ordinating United Nations activities with those of the specialized agencies as laid down in the Charter of the United Nations, and not the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination, whose function was to assist the Council in its work. He hoped, therefore, that the July session would be essentially one of co-ordination and cooperation with no hint of rivalry, as had sometimes been the case in the past, between organs which were obliged, by the nature of things, to act in concert.

32. Mr. ZAKHAROV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) said that his delegation welcomed the efforts made by the Secretariat in the working paper (E/L.1249 and Add.1 and 2) to find a means of reducing the calendar of meetings and related documentation to proportions where they could usefully contribute to the purposes of the Council. However, it had doubts concerning some of the recommendations. The Soviet Union had always supported the need to rationalize United Nations activities in the economic and social field so as to achieve the maximum possible efficiency; that was the criterion it would apply to the recommendations.

33. His delegation could give unreserved support only to suggestion No. 20, (see E/L.1249), read in conjunction with explanatory paragraph 40 (*ibid.*). The other matters required further discussion. With regard to suggestions Nos. 7 and 8, he inquired whether the publication of summaries would not involve even more expenditure than the issue of the full reports. With regard to suggestion No. 2 on joint meetings of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination, he expressed concern lest biennial instead of annual meetings might result in a weakening of the relationship between the Council and the specialized agencies as established in Articles 57 and 63 of the United Nations Charter.

34. Mr. KASSUM (Secretary of the Council) assured the members of the Council that the Secretariat had taken careful note of the suggestions made during the debate and would submit a document concerning the administrative implications of some of those suggestions at a later stage.

35. Replying to the comments made by the USSR representative, he said that the purpose of suggestions Nos. 7 and 8 (see E/L.1249) was to ensure that all the documentation which the Council needed for its summer session would be issued in good time. Hitherto, the Secretariat had often had to break the six weeks rule because of delay in producing the voluminous World Economic Survey and the regional economic surveys, due to the late arrival of certain statistics; that delay had in turn retarded the production of the shorter sessional documents. On the other hand, the summaries, which were produced routinely and entailed no extra expense, were already available. If the Council adopted those two suggestions, the Secretariat could give priority to the preparation and issuance of the other documents needed for the summer session. As soon as the Survey and the regional economic surveys were completed and available for distribution, they would be sent to Governments.

36. Joint meetings between the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination had not been envisaged in the United Nations Charter; on the contrary, the relationship between the United Nations and the specialized agencies was governed by special agreements.

37. The purpose of the suggestion made in paragraph 3 of document E/L.1249/Add.2 was to facilitate action by regional economic commissions which wished to dispense with summary records but were prevented from doing so by the terms of their rules of procedure.

38. Mr. ZAKHAROV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) expressed his satisfaction with the explanations given by the Secretary of the Council.

39. The PRESIDENT suggested that the Council should decide to refer the suggestions contained in the first part of document E/L.1249, as well as the proposals made in the course of the debate, to the Co-ordination Committee at the forty-seventh session, with the exception of suggestion No. 21. which would be

referred to the Committee for Programme and Coordination for consideration at its June meetings.

It was so decided.

40. The PRESIDENT further suggested that the Council should decide to give immediate effect, on an experimental basis, to suggestions Nos. 7, 8 and 20 in document E/L.1249.

It was so decided.

41. The PRESIDENT suggested finally that, in taking note of document E/L.1249/Add.2, the Council should also decide to amend rule 37 of the rules of procedure of the functional commissions by the addition in the first sentence of the rule, of the words "here required", and request the regional economic commissions to make a similar change in their rules of procedure.

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.