



Sixteenth session
Agenda item 61

REVIEW OF THE ACTIVITIES AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SECRETARIAT

Decentralization of the economic and social activities of the
United Nations and strengthening of the regional economic
commissions

Thirtieth report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions to the General Assembly at its
sixteenth session

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the note by the Secretary-General (A/C.5/901) on the additional staff resources which are likely to be required for the purpose of implementing the draft resolution adopted by the Second Committee on 20 November 1961 (A/C.2/L.585) on decentralization of the economic and social activities of the United Nations and strengthening of the regional economic commissions.
2. The Advisory Committee has taken into account, at the same time, that the substance of the above-mentioned resolution is closely related to, and will be considered by the Fifth Committee in conjunction with, agenda item 61 "Review of the activities and organization of the Secretariat: report of the Committee of Experts appointed under General Assembly resolution 1446 (XIV) and recommendations thereon by the Secretary-General."
3. It will be recalled, in this regard, that the major question examined by the Committee of Experts was the relationship between the functions of the staff of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at Headquarters and those of the regional economic commissions. In its report (A/4776, paras. 108 to 113 and 119 to 147) the latter Committee presented a series of detailed recommendations for the extensive decentralization of the economic and social activities of the Organization, including technical assistance.

4. In commenting on these recommendations (A/4794, paras. 41 to 47), the Secretary-General expressed full agreement with the basic principle of direct participation and association of the regional economic commissions in the over-all economic and social activities of the Organization, but expressed certain reservations on any far-reaching change in the concept and administration of the technical assistance programme which, in his view, called for a flexible approach.

5. Bearing in mind that the question of decentralization was being considered independently by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly and that the technical aspects of the matter were due to be dealt with by the Secretary-General in the special report he had been called upon, in terms of Economic and Social Council resolution 823 (XXXII), to submit to the General Assembly at its current session, the Advisory Committee, in its report (A/4901, paras. 35 and 36) on the work of the Committee of Experts and the recommendations of the Secretary-General thereon, stated that it wished to defer its detailed comments on the subject.

6. The Advisory Committee has now had an opportunity to study the special report by the Secretary-General (A/4911) as well as the result of its consideration by the Second Committee under agenda item 12.

7. The Advisory Committee has been informed that, as a result of the extensive debates on the subject, both in the Economic and Social Council and in the Second Committee, there has been a considerable clarification of the meaning of decentralization and the manner in which it should be implemented; at the same time, many differing views have been reconciled. Moreover, the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General reveals that a general approach to the various aspects and requirements of the process of decentralization has been arrived at by consultation between Headquarters authorities and the executive secretaries of the four regional commissions, on the one hand, and between the Secretary-General and the executive heads of the United Nations agencies on the other. Due regard has also been had throughout to the recommendations of the Group of Experts and the comments of the Secretary-General. The resolution adopted by the Second Committee on 20 November 1961 may be said, therefore, to mark the successful conclusion of an important

phase since decentralization was accepted as a general policy objective by the General Assembly in resolution 1518 (XV) of 15 December 1960. The basic approach having thus been outlined, practical implementation by executive means may now be expected to ensue with due dispatch.

8. The Advisory Committee notes that the main elements of the draft resolution recommended by the Second Committee are the following:

(a) That the secretariats of the regional economic commissions as executive arms of the Organization in the economic and social fields, including technical assistance operations, should be strengthened without delay, by means of increasing delegation to the regional secretariats of substantive and operational functions and responsibilities and the provision of the requisite resources, including personnel;

(b) That, at the same time, the central substantive functions, including policy guidance and co-ordination, should be maintained;

(c) That this decentralization should aim, inter alia, at achieving simplicity of procedure and of administrative methods for technical co-operation.

9. The Advisory Committee takes note of the fact that there would thus appear to be complete agreement that decentralization must be implemented within the context of existing legislation and that it will be achieved, as heretofore, by delegation from the centre, leaving global financial arrangements and control policies intact. The Committee understands that there has also been general endorsement by the General Assembly of measures already taken to secure increasing participation of the regional commissions in operational activities, which has been a policy pursued as a logical consequence of the merger in 1959 of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the former Technical Assistance Administration. In terms of the resolution, the Secretary-General is now under mandate to take appropriate further administrative measures, to be decided upon in continuing consultation with the Advisory Committee and, where necessary, the Technical Assistance Committee, fully to implement the policy of decentralization. While the details of future development have yet to emerge in concrete terms, it would appear that the main intent will be to strengthen the Commissions in all substantive areas concerned with technical assistance, in order that they may assume, to a greater extent, many of the functions now performed at the centre. At the discretion of the executive secretaries of the commissions, special administrative arrangements may also be

made to provide the executive secretary with the necessary advice on all technical assistance operations in the region. The division of work between Headquarters and the region will necessarily have to be decided on a pragmatic basis, each case being decided on its own merits as the occasion arises. In this connexion, it would seem that the role which, in the view of the Headquarters authorities, can be most usefully played by the commissions would be, in the first instance, at the planning and programming stage.

10. The Advisory Committee looks forward to the submission of a detailed plan of steps to be taken in the immediate future to carry out the Assembly's wishes. Since urgent action has been requested, the Committee would be prepared to give the matter its further attention at its spring meeting. In the meantime, the Committee observes from the note by the Secretary-General (A/C.5/901) that it is intended to apply part of the staff resources already provided in the 1962 budget estimates to the additional needs directly associated with the plans for further decentralization, which are being worked out with the executive secretaries of the commissions. It is hoped, also, that a certain number of posts might become available as the result of an internal review of work programmes of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs for 1962 which is being made at the present time.

11. By way of provisional comment, the Advisory Committee would express the hope that the Secretary-General will adopt the basic premise that one of the main objectives of decentralization, as stated in the resolution, is the achievement of simplicity of procedure and of administrative methods for technical co-operation. While weight should be given to the call for urgent action, the need for careful thought and planning should nevertheless be stressed. Duplication of work should be avoided, especially in the administrative areas. The substantive functions to be delegated to the Commissions should be clearly stated. While some staff increases may be unavoidable in the initial stages, the Committee would also express the hope that, by prudent redistribution of resources, a more economical staffing pattern as between Headquarters and the commissions will eventually be achieved.

12. In considering the proposals to be made by the Secretary-General, the Advisory Committee will devote special attention to questions of administrative

and financial co-ordination. In commenting, in past years, on the expansion in the work programmes and responsibilities of the commissions, the Advisory Committee has touched on various aspects of this problem. Thus in its twenty-fifth report to the tenth session of the General Assembly,^{1/} the Committee stated that the central problem in the relationship between the Headquarters Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the secretariats of the regional economic commissions was the appropriate measure of regional autonomy consistent, on the one hand, with a unified United Nations policy and, on the other, with the increasing emphasis on the provision of direct assistance in the solution of problems affecting the development of the economically under-developed countries. In paragraphs 17 to 21 of the Committee's second report to the eleventh session of the General Assembly^{2/} and paragraphs 44 and 45 of its fifth report to the twelfth session,^{3/} the Committee noted the growing shift of emphasis to the regions that marked the Organization's activities in the economic and social fields and restated the resultant cardinal problem referred to above. The Advisory Committee considered that there should be a continuing review and periodical inspection of all overseas offices and missions to ensure efficiency and economy. The Committee also made the point that, while the administrative and financial aspects of the operation of overseas offices and missions came under some central examination, there was need to strengthen the continuing review of their management by the Office of the Controller, in relation to the planned utilization of staff resources in the Secretariat as a whole. In its reports to the fourteenth and fifteenth sessions on administrative and budgetary co-ordination of the United Nations with the specialized agencies,^{4/} the Committee commented in some

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Tenth Session, Annexes, agenda items 38 and 47, document A/3050.

2/ Ibid., Eleventh Session, Supplement No. 7.

3/ Ibid., Twelfth Session, Supplement No. 7.

4/ Ibid., Fourteenth Session, Annexes, agenda item 49, document A/4172; Fifteenth Session, Annexes, agenda item 54, document A/4599.

detail on questions of administrative and financial co-ordination in the field in the context of the growing decentralization of the operations of the several organizations. In this regard, the Committee noted in paragraph 34 of Document A/4599 that the question of field organization raised the issue as to the extent of decentralization of administrative and financial responsibility which should accompany a decentralization of programmes and operations. The Committee went on to say that the answer would generally depend upon the particular circumstances and administrative organization of the agency or programme; in all cases, however, the Committee felt that administrative and financial responsibility should be clearly defined and capable of simple and straightforward application.

13. The Advisory Committee will also follow with interest a number of fundamental issues to which it attaches particular importance.

14. Thus, it notes with satisfaction that the resolution of the Second Committee makes the point that decentralization should in no way affect the provision of assistance to countries which are not members of any regional economic commission, as for example, a number of countries in the Middle East. The Committee trusts that every effort will be made to attend to the requirements of these countries from Headquarters in order that the universal nature of United Nations economic and social programmes and services might be preserved.

15. The Advisory Committee notes that staffing difficulties have been experienced in the case of certain commissions and that strenuous efforts are being made to overcome them. The Committee would hope, in this connexion, that care will be taken not to delegate responsibilities to the regional commissions until the necessary machinery for their fulfilment has been established on a working basis. The Committee submits that this would be in the interests of the commissions themselves, not all of which have yet reached the same stage of development.

16. The Committee welcomes the fact that the Second Committee resolution has underlined the merit of Economic and Social Council resolution 856 (XXXII) on co-operation between resident representatives of the Technical Assistance Board and the executive secretaries of the regional economic commissions. The Advisory Committee notes in this regard that it has been understood, in consultation with the regional economic commissions (A/4911, para. 12 A.15), that, while the commissions have a key role to play in initiating regional programmes, country programming is at the root of United Nations technical assistance and that resident representatives will be strengthened as time goes on. Consequently, it is essential that the resident representatives maintain the closest contacts with the secretariats of the regional commissions at all times and particularly before the final elaboration of the country programmes. It is equally important that the resident representatives be given full support, both by Headquarters and the regional secretariats.

17. It will also be necessary for the executive heads of the specialized agencies and the executive secretaries of the regional economic commissions to adjust further existing co-operative arrangements between them to meet the requirements of decentralization. The Committee is glad to note in this regard that the executive heads of the agencies have recognized the fact that extensive decentralization is bound to have important repercussions on their work and that they have reaffirmed the principle that the individual agreements between the United Nations and their organizations apply in respect of relationships at the regional no less than at the headquarters level. They have also put on record that the agreements, the network of understanding which have been built upon them, and the resulting distribution of responsibility among members of the United Nations family should in no way be affected by the measures in the direction of decentralization which the United Nations itself may undertake.
