### FORTY-SIXTH SESSION

Official Records

FIFTH COMMITTEE
9th meeting
held on
Tuesday, 15 October 1991
at 10 a.m.
New York

### SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 9th MEETING

Chairman:

Mr. MUNTASSER

(Libyan Arab Jamahiriya)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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General debate

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## The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

## AGENDA ITEM 113: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/46/32)

- 1. Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda) said that the Department of Conference Services (DCS) had a special role to play in ensuring that the United Nations fulfilled its primary objective of harmonizing international action through dialogue. The dawning of a new world order made it imperative for Member States to deliberate on actions that would promote the common interest. The timely provision of conference services was of critical importance in that endeavour, which would be frustrated if haphazard deep cuts were made in conference-servicing resources.
- 2. The availability of adequate and efficiently utilized conference services was the concern of all Member States. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 43/222, the Committee on Conferences should continue to provide the necessary political guidance to all organs or programmes using conference services funded under the regular budget. The primary role of the Committee was to facilitate dialogue between Member States through the provision of adequate conference services; it should not allow allow itself to be used as a vehicle for blocking or frustrating dialogue. In that connection, his delegation reiterated the understanding that had been reached in the adoption of paragraph 4 (c) of resolution 43/222 B that the Committee on Conferences had no budgetary role.
- 3. His delegation endorsed the recommendation in paragraph 29 of the Committee's report that the General Assembly should request subsidiary organs to review their meeting requirements. Every effort should be made to complete meetings within the scheduled timetable, although, it might in some instances be necessary to authorize additional meetings in order to enable a committee to complete its work. Undue complaints had been made concerning such legitimate requests. Member States should ensure that the interests of all were met, and not allow the use of a cut-off date for meetings to defer decisions that might not be of interest to some delegations, but that were of critical importance to others.
- 4. His own delegation had consistently stressed the importance of summary records for the efficient conduct of business. While it might be expedient to eliminate summary records as a means of reducing costs, such a step should not be construed as desirable or as promoting efficiency. At the forty-fifth session, his delegation had called for a study of the impact on efficiency of not providing summary records; it hoped that the study would be completed prior to the forty-seventh session. In the meantime, he remained unpersuaded by the rationale employed in denying several subsidiary bodies summary records. In that connection, he welcomed Economic and Social Council decision 1991/295, which called for a review of the question of summary records of all its subsidiary bodies at its 1992 regular session. It was his understanding that that decision superseded the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 62 of its report.

(Mr. Irumba, Uganda)

- 5. The 32-page limit for reports should continue to be applied with flexibility. With regard to biennialization, his delegation had always been sceptical of the claim that it improved efficiency. In fact, biennialization simply reduced the opportunity available to Member States to engage in dialogue on major issues. For example, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme had been pressured to biennialize its work, but had been compelled to establish a Committee of Permanent Representatives to meet in its absence, and that Committee itself required conference services. The biennialization of meetings might be expedient, but was not desirable; in any event, it was a matter to be decided upon by the organ concerned. It was from that perspective that his delegation viewed the recommendation contained in paragraph 14 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.
- 6. With regard to inter-sessional departures from the approved calendar of conferences, the Committee's recommendations in paragraphs 77 (b) (v) and 138 of its report should ensure that all members of the Committee were notified of any such proposals which had programme budget implications.
- 7. With respect to the provision of conference services for organs and programmes under the regular budget, it should be noted that the bodies concerned were mainly involved in development activities. His delegation cautioned against the attempt to redirect the resources of those bodies from development to the conference servicing of their meetings. In order to ensure the continued concentration on field activities, conference services for the bodies concerned should continue to be financed under the regular budget.
- 8. With regard to exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243, his delegation had serious reservations concerning the last sentence of paragraph 101 of the report of the Committee on Conferences, in view of its far-reaching implications. As had been said, the dictatorship of the few was as unacceptable as the tyranny of the majority. The approach referred to in paragraph 101 had been used, for example, to paralyse the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean.
- 9. His delegation welcomed improvements in the methodology for evaluating the use of conference-servicing resources, as called for in General Assembly resolution 45/238 A. It should be noted, however, that meetings sometimes needed to be suspended for consultations so that a decision could be reached.
- 10. He shared the view of the Committee on Conferences that timeliness in the issuance of documentation had a major impact on both utilization and planning accuracy, and endorsed the inclusion in the methodology of a new indicator on timeliness of documentation. While his delegation noted the increase in the average utilization rate to 78 per cent, it thought that failure to include certain crucial factors, such as timeliness, rendered the methodology unreliable, and that undue importance should therefore not be attached to it. In that connection he urged the Secretariat to adhere to the six-week rule on the issuance of documentation.

# (Mr. Irumba, Uganda)

- 11. Commenting on the application of new technology to conference servicing, he stressed the importance of the balanced application of new technology throughout the system, including the regional commissions. In particular, less developed countries should be given access to technology introduced in the area of conference services. He would welcome an indication of progress in improving conference services at the Economic Commission for Africa, called for in General Assembly resolution 45/248 B (sect. II. paras. 5 and 6).
- 12. His delegation recognized the importance of conference services in the work of the United Nations and commended the staff of DCS for their dedication, despite the financial strains to which the Department had been subjected. He trusted that the Department's problems would be addressed in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993.
- 13. Mr. TEIRUNAGARAN (Singapore) said that his delegation supported the introduction of computer-based technology in order to improve the Organization's efficiency, on the understanding that it was applied evenly throughout the system. Given the inherent expense, only tried and tested technology should be employed. The Organization should undertake a long-term analysis of manpower savings attributable to new technology. His delegation was concerned by the fact that the computer systems in use at UNDP were apparently not fully compatible. Failure to achieve full integration would mean more work and higher costs in the maintenance of systems, while failure to take compatibility into account would make it more difficult to integrate systems later on. He asked what steps the Organization had taken to entrust the introduction of new technologies to a centralized authority.
- 14. Mr. DANKWA (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, the Committee on Conferences was required to recommend a draft calendar designed to meet the needs of the United Nations and to ensure the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. The understanding of the General Assembly was that the Committee on Conferences had no authority under that resolution to override decisions on meetings decided upon by legislative organs. In the light of those legislative limitations, any allegation that the Committee was ineffective would seem to be misplaced. Related to the authority of the Committee on Conferences was the question of the methodology for assessing the utilization of conference-servicing resources. The Committee had recognized the imperfections of the current methodology and was experimenting with a new methodology for a three-year period, beginning in 1990.
- 15. The Committee had reviewed 43 sessions of intergovernmental bodies held in 1990, of which 29 had had a utilization factor at or above the 75 per cent benchmark figure. The Assembly should consider how the remaining bodies could be encouraged to reach that benchmark.
- 16. With regard to requests by subsidiary organs to meet during regular sessions of the Assembly, he said that the Committee had authorized eight such

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bodies to meet at Headquarters during the forty-sixth session. Three other organs had also informed the Committee of their need to meet periodically during the year, including during the General Assembly, to monitor developments in their areas of competence. The Committee had reviewed each request from the standpoint of feasibility. Circumstances could require subsidiary organs to meet during the General Assembly, but the Committee had advised the organs concerned to re-evaluate their work programmes so that routine meetings could be accommodated earlier in the year. It did not seek to limit access to conference services, but had to make judgements as to the need for exceptions. Accordingly, the recommendations in its report also gave general guidance on ways of avoiding disruption of the meetings programme. In short, the Committee had made an expert analysis of each request, taking into account its own mandate and the mandates of the subsidiary bodies concerned.

- 17. The Committee had taken a similar approach in its examination of requests for the extension of regular sessions. Four such requests had been approved in 1991, from the Commission on Transnational Corporations, the UNDP Governing Council, the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), and ACABQ. Since none of the sessions in question had been concluded, the paramount consideration had been how best to accommodate the requests. For example, it would have been irresponsible of the Committee to deny CPC a three-day extension only for the Organization to incur the additional expenditure of another session, probably of one week, in order for CPC to complete its work.
- 18. It had also been suggested that the Committee on Conferences could hold one substantive session every two years, but that might result in a session lasting longer than the total current number of meetings. Any such change would also affect the Committee's terms of reference, which required it to report annually to the General Assembly, as well as the annual rotation of its membership. The suggestion therefore seemed premature.
- 19. The call for a fresh outside look at DCS had come about because the Department's proposals in such matters as its programme budget had been handled within the Department and the Secretariat without consideration by a supervisory intergovernmental organ. DCS had issued an informal paper summarizing comments made on the subject at the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly, when several delegations had supported the view that a leading role could be played by the Committee on Conferences and that perhaps a working group could be set up for the purpose. The Committee on Conferences had now determined that its mandate from the General Assembly enabled it to play such a supervisory role and it had defined its place in the review as the intergovernmental "parent" to DCS. The Department would thus benefit from the type of review of its programme which other Secretariat units received in CFC. The Committee had decided to review the Department as and when necessary. As an initial step it had examined the documents on programme performance, the programme budget and the medium-term plan. It had also listed, in paragraph 123 of its report, the areas indicated by the Secretariat. which might require further review. The need for a fresh outside look had

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thus been largely met by the Committee. In order to set the record straight, a corrigendum would be issued concerning the wording of paragraph 124 of the Committee's report.

- 20. He wished to place on record his gratitude to the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments and his staff for the cooperation which they had extended to him, and he thanked the members of the Fifth Committee for their well-placed interest in the work of the Committee on Conferences.
- 21. Mr. WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) said that DCS remained fully committed to the revitalization and reform process initiated five years earlier by the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts (Group of 18). In that process it had consistently followed the guidance of the Committee on Conferences, whose mandate included ensuring "optimum utilization of conference facilities and services". It was also committed to the review of conference services proposed by the Secretary-General in his final report on the implementation of resolution 41/213 (A/44/222) and had therefore welcomed the 1989 decision of the Committee on Conferences to play a role in the review. It was heartening that at the forty-fourth session members of the Fifth Committee had called for the Committee on Conferences to play a leading and vital role in the review. DCS had worked with the Committee on Conferences to determine the areas to be studied.
- 22. In addition to the Committee on Conferences, a number of other external entities had also carried out reviews of DCS, making the Department one of the most scrutinized in the Secretariat. It had been the subject of 12 studies by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and was ready to cooperate with JIU in updating those studies or undertaking new ones, as a number of delegations had suggested. In addition, there had been six management studies conducted by the Management Advisory Service and numerous inspections by internal and external auditors, including comprehensive departmental audits during both the current and the previous biennium. The Department had also employed consultants on such subjects as the sale of publications and technological innovations projects. Such outside studies had proved very useful in specific areas of technological innovation and would be continued within the limited resources.
- 23. All those reviews had been complemented by studies made by the General Assembly, through ACABQ and the Fifth Committee, of such matters as the unification of conference services at Vienna, the implementation of the optical disk project, the printing requirements of the Organization, the review of language services in the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the DCS-related parts of the Secretary-General's reports on the implementation of resolution 41/213 and the technological innovations programme.

(Mr. Wyzner)

- 24. ACABQ had requested a report which had been submitted by the Secretary-General in 1990 on the impact of the new technologies on the workload standards for conference-servicing staff. ACABQ had originally addressed a request to the Secretary-General for workload and other data to be used in estimating the financial implications of meetings, and the establishment of uniform conference-servicing staffing requirements for meetings had led to what were now commonly called "workload standards". In 1990 the General Assembly had raised workload standards for word-processing staff by 30 per cent and had established standards for reproduction staff at New York and Geneva. It had noted, in resolution 45/248 A, that the revised workload standards reflected a further step towards enhanced productivity of conference-servicing staff, including improvements achieved through the application of new technologies. Conference-servicing staff was the only group in the Organization which had workload standards reviewed and approved by ACABQ and the General Assembly.
- 25. The Department had also submitted to the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) a proposal for developing workload standards for the whole United Nations system. The Meeting had established a working group for that purpose, and the Secretariat would report on the results to the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) and to the General Assembly at its next session.
- 26. A number of delegations had expressed interest in the impact of the technological innovations programme on the Department's work, and the representative of Uganda had just asked about proposals for ECA. On that specific point, a report was being prepared in response to resolution 45/248; in addition to the technological innovations programme, discussions were under way concerning the training of translators at ECA, and a report would be submitted to ACABQ. The question of the compatibility of computer systems, which the representative of Singapore had just raised, would again be addressed in a report on the optical disk project to be submitted to ACABQ and the Fifth Committee. The Department was very concerned about the issue and was seeking to ensure that its computer systems were compatible with all others. The matter had also been dealt with at recent sessions of IAMLADP.
- 27. As well as enhancing the quality of services, the technological innovations had led to a reduction in the level of resources required. For example, staffing resources in text-processing units had been cut by 59 posts, or 20 per cent of the staffing complement, by the end of 1989, with 8 per cent of that reduction having been achieved before the Group of 18 had submitted its recommendations; furthermore, temporary assistance for the General Assembly had been reduced from 81 to 48 posts, or by more than 40 per cent, by the same date.
- 28. Technological innovations had also produced substantial savings in materials. For example, the installation of the automated plate-making system in the reproduction facilities had made it possible to save some \$100,000 per

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biennium in paper and related supplies, abolish three General Service posts, and increase productivity by some 50 million page impressions. Similarly, the further development of an in-house electronic typesetting capacity and of the electronic production of cartographic materials and colour work and covers for publications had resulted in a meaningful decrease in the use of external typesetting and printing services in New York.

- 29. Accordingly, where technological innovations had been introduced in a comprehensive manner, their impact on cost-efficiency was striking. Conversely, where the computer base was either non-existent or limited, gains in cost-efficiency were less likely to occur. In that connection, table 1 in the report of the Secretary-General on the status of technological innovations in the United Nations (A/C.5/46/1/Corr.1) indicated an average ratio of 0.66 personal computers to posts at Headquarters. The ratio of 0.41 for DCS was well below the Headquarters average. Clearly, the gains achievable through the introduction of technology demanded an investment in the technology itself and in training to optimize its use.
- 30. The Department was grateful for the Committee's continued support for, and interest in, its work and would take into account all the comments that had been made during the debate. It remained committed to pursuing the goals set for conference services.
- 31. Mr. NASSER (Egypt) said that the point made by his delegation in regard to the examination by the Committee on Conferences of related sections of the proposed programme budget had been overlooked. While his delegation was not opposed to the Committee having a role in the budgetary process, it would note that the Committee's mandate was defined in General Assembly resolution 43/222 B. An integral part of that resolution was the understanding that nothing in the resolution should be conceived as giving the Committee power to override decisions on programmes or meetings or to play a budgetary role. The feeling of the majority had been that until the General Assembly decided otherwise, the Committee on Conferences should work within the limits set by the General Assembly in the resolution. His question, therefore, had been whether the Committee's examination of sections of the proposed programme budget was consistent with the terms of resolution 43/222 B. He believed that it deserved an answer and hoped that the general debate would not be regarded as concluded until one had been provided.
- 32. Mr. ETUKET (Uganda) said that his delegation associated itself fully with the comments of the Egyptian delegation. He thanked the Under-Secretary-General for his explanation of the point raised by his delegation in connection with section II, paragraphs 5 and 6, of General Assembly resolution 45/248 B. He noted that his delegation had stressed the importance of ensuring that the application of new technology was of benefit to all countries, in particular the least developed. It was important that the least developed countries should be enabled to use whatever technology was adopted in the Department of Conference Services. He hoped that that aspect of the matter would be addressed.

- 33. Mr. SPAANS (Netherlands), speaking on bhalf of the Twelve States members of the European Community, noted that a corrigendum would be issued to paragraph 124 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/46/32). The Twelve had made particular reference to that paragraph in their statement, pointing out that no further information had been provided on the plan to invite a "fresh outside look". They would appreciate an explanation from the Under-Secretary-General.
- 34. Mr. DANKWA (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that the corrigendum to paragraph 124 was intended merely to make the wording conform to the text agreed on by the Committee and introduced no change of substance.
- 35. Although the request of the Netherlands delegation had been addressed to the Under-Secretary-General, he would like to comment on it himself. It was true that the Twelve had expressed the hope that a report would be issued, but that hope was simply an expression of the views of a group of Member States. The Secretariat, or any intergovernmental body, took action on the basis of resolutions or decisions. The General Assembly, in resolution 44/196 A, had not asked the Secretary-General to publish the results of the review of the Department of Conference Services but had, rather, invited the Committee on Conferences to play a role in it.
- In response to the point made by the representative of Egypt, he read out the understanding which had been attached to General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, according to which nothing in paragraph 4 (c) of that draft resolution should be construed as giving the Committee on Conferences any role in the budgetary process or authority to override decisions on programmes and on meetings and conferences duly decided upon by legislative organs of the The terms of reference set out in paragraph 4 (c), however, needed to be interpreted in the light of the regulations governing programme planning, monitoring and evaluation adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 37/234. The procedure was the following: an intergovernmental body made a recommendation to the General Assembly in plenary meeting; if adopted, it was then formulated in terms of a resolution or decision; that resolution or decision was converted by the Secretariat into a programme; the programme was then reviewed by an intergovernmental body, under the rules governing programming, to make sure that it properly reflected the resolution or decision in question; it was then examined by CPC, which had an opportunity to coordinate all programmes, looking at them from a larger perspective and, among other things, reducing duplication; lastly, the programme went before ACABQ, which examined its costing.
- 37. Section 32 of the proposed programme budget, which was a services programme, although the services were rooted in the decisions of various intergovernmental organs, was not reviewed by CPC and the Committee on Conferences had realized that it could play a useful role by ensuring that it reflected the decisions of the various intergovernmental bodies concerned. That role came well within its terms of reference, as set forth in paragraph 4 (a) of resolution 43/222 B, whereby it was to advise the General

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Assembly on all matters pertaining to the organization of conferences in the United Nations. He stressed once again that there was no duplication or any departure from the understanding attached to the resolution. The Committee on Conferences was not seeking any budgetary role: the costing of the programme remained the province of ACABQ.

- 38. The reference to the introduction of new technologies evenly throughout the United Nations, in paragraph 135 of the Committee's report (A/46/32), was intended to convey that, given the basic fact that resources were limited, it was important to avoid a disproportionate amount of those resources being channelled to a single unit.
- 39. Mr. SPAANS (Netherlands) said that the Twelve would appreciate an answer to their question from the Under-Secretary-General himself.
- Mr. WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) said that he endorsed the reply given by the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences on his behalf and had refrained from adding to it in order to save the Committee's time. He believed, however, that a probable source of the misunderstanding he detected lay in the use of the word "outside". To the Netherlands delegation, "outside" might have meant outside the United Nations, something coming from the "outside world". To the Secretariat, and especially to the Department of Conference Services, "outside" meant outside the Department itself. Thus, to his own Department, the Fifth Committee, the Committee on Conferences, the Joint Inspection Unit, and the Management Advisory Service were all "outside" bodies. In addition to the role played by the Committee on Conferences, more than 20 studies had been carried out in the period in question with the full cooperation of DCS, twelve by the Joint Inspection Unit, six by the Management Advisory Service and several by ACABQ, all of which, in the Department's view, offered an "outside" look.
- 41. The CHAIRMAN announced that the general debate on the pattern of conferences was concluded.

AGENDA ITEM 107: PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993 (continued) (A/46/6/Rev.1 and A/46/7)

AGENDA ITEM 108: PROGRAMME PLANNING (continued) (A/46/16 and Add.1, A/46/173 and A/46/330)

### General dopate

42. Mr. KAARIA (Finland), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, noted that the United Nations had relied increasingly in recent years on voluntary funding to finance its activities. The net regular budget of \$1.96 billion for the next biennium was small in relation to the enormous tasks that the Organization was expected to undertake. To put it in

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perspective, the regular budget for one year was approximately equal to the annual budget for UNICEF, or less than 2 per cent of the annual value of global exports of major weapons. Yet financing it remained a problem and the situation was now worse than it had been a decade earlier. The absence of any viable system of reserves had jeopardized the functioning of the Organization. It was intolerable that member countries were not prepared to finance the costs of United Nations activities. The Nordic delegations shared both the Secretary-General's concern about the gravity of the situation and his view on the need to find a permanent solution to the problem of the timely payment of assessed contributions. They also believed that the question of adequate reserves should be addressed at the current session.

- 43. The Nordic countries accepted the rate of real growth calculated for the regular budget for 1992-1993 and considered that the budget proposals accorded well with the priorities approved by the General Assembly. However, ACABQ had recommended that the proposed expenditures should be cut by \$43.4 million, or almost 2 per cent. There was always room for rationalization and savings in any big administration, for example, by the more effective deployment of staff and resources, but the Nordic delegations had serious difficulties with many of the Advisory Committee's recommendations for reductions, for instance those concerning the activities of UNHCR. They also found it difficult to accept both the proposed cuts relating to the strengthening of the Centre for Human Rights and the overall cuts under section 2, in particular those affecting research and the collection of information. In addition, they found it hard to accept the substantial cuts proposed by the Advisory Committee under sections 33 D, 33 E and 35, because the maintenance and improvement activities concerned were usually financially rewarding in the long run.
- 44. The Advisory Committee's proposal for a cut of \$15 million across the board, on the basis of so-called balances of unobligated appropriations and unliquidated obligations (A/46/7, para. 22), was debatable. A thorough discussion of the various questions which it raised was needed. The Nordic delegations would also like to hear the views of representatives of the Secretary-General on that kind of approach and on the effects of such cuts.
- 45. The United Nations budget had become considerably leaner in recent years and, by some calculations, the Organization now had slightly less funds available in real terms than 10 years previously. There was also a new budget procedure which ensured better preparation and tighter scrutiny of budget proposals. Against that background, the Nordic countries did not think that a zero growth rate for the budget should be the aim at a time when new tasks were constantly being entrusted to the Organization. It was extremely important that the United Nations should be able to respond to changing political needs and circumstances.
- 46. Voluntary funding could not provide an answer to the Organization's financial problems. Extrabudgetary funds based largely on voluntary financing had increased considerably over the years. Extrabudgetary funding was also

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increasing in areas formerly wholly financed from assessed contributions to the regular budget. That trend should not be allowed to continue because the financing of United Nations activities must have the much more solid basis which only assessed contributions could provide. The increasing demand for voluntary contributions would inevitably raise the question of sharing the burden of financing the United Nations more equitably among its Member States. Moreover, there was a need for greater transparency in matters connected with the use of extrabudgetary funds linked to regularly financed activities. The Nordic delegations were looking forward to the Secretary-General's report on the use of extrabudgetary resources.

47. The Nordic countries were the largest contributors to the United Nations system per capita, providing substantial amounts for various voluntary funds and programmes and paying more than 30 per cent of the budgets of UNDP and UNICEF. They were ready to play a constructive part in solving the problems confronting the Committee, which included not only budgetary issues proper but, perhaps more importantly, such questions as the full and timely payment of assessed contributions and the means of providing the resources required.

The meeting rose at 12.35 p.m.