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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1980-1981

Establishment of the Information Systems Unit in the Department
of International Economic and Social Affairs

Tenth report of the Advisory Committee on
Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the establishment of the Information Systems Unit in the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs (A/C.5/35/32 and Corr.1). This report has been submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 34/233, section I, in which the Assembly decided that

"subject to the availability of additional voluntary funds, the pilot operation of the Development Information System of the Information Systems Unit shall be extended for a further year, that the use of the pilot system shall be carefully monitored by valid statistical methods and that the system shall be submitted to the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems for review and comment and a report thereon circulated to delegations no later than 1 August 1980 so that the General Assembly may pronounce itself, at its thirty-fifth session, on the continuance, or otherwise, of the Information Systems Unit".

2. The Secretary-General recapitulates in Section I of his report (paras. 1-8), the circumstances leading to the establishment in March 1978 of the Information Systems Unit and subsequent developments culminating in General Assembly resolution 34/233, section 1. In Section II, he discusses the role of information systems for international development (paras. 9-11). Section III of his report (paras. 12-29) provides background information on the setting up and operation of the Development Information System (DIS) as well as the activities of the Information Systems Unit in the area of co-ordination and co-operation with substantive units during the initial pilot phase. He then describes the activities of the Unit during the extended period of pilot operation, in particular, the further development and operation of its system, and outlines the activities that could be undertaken during 1981-1982 as well as the possible financial consequences should

the General Assembly decide to continue the operation of DIS (Sects. IV to VI, paras. 30-64, and Sects. VII and VIII, paras. 65-75). In this connexion, the Advisory Committee notes that in paragraph 1, Section II of resolution 33/116 A, the General Assembly

"... Recalls the decision in section V, paragraph 2, of its resolution 32/212 of 21 December 1977 that there is no commitment on the part of the Organization subsequently to transfer the costs of the operation of the Information Services Unit of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat to the regular budget".

3. In the course of its consideration of the question, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions visited the DIS facility, met the representatives of the Secretary-General and received an evaluation report on DIS prepared by an evaluator provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In paragraph 7 of his report, the Secretary-General explains why he sought an evaluation of DIS through UNESCO instead of arranging for a review by the Inter-Organization Board as called for by General Assembly resolution 34/233, section 1. The representatives of the Secretary-General informed the Advisory Committee that the UNESCO evaluator's report became available in late September 1980.

4. In his previous reports to the General Assembly (A/C.5/31/69, para. 4, and A/C.5/32/47, para. 4), the Secretary-General advocated the establishment and continuation of the Information Systems Unit, on the grounds that (a) it would lead to the creation of a retrieval system capable of providing access to unpublished documents containing information of lasting value in the files of the Departments of International Economic and Social Affairs and of Technical Co-operation for Development; (b) it would co-ordinate the sectoral information services in various units involved in economic and social activities as well as co-ordinate the proposed system with those of other members of the United Nations family, and (c) it would assist Member States in identifying their information needs and in establishing links with appropriate international information systems and services. In its related reports, the Advisory Committee questioned the cost-effectiveness of the proposal. ^{1/} The Joint Inspection Unit, in its report to the General Assembly (A/34/380, para. 15), also stated that

"If the need for it at the costs in prospect can be demonstrated, then the other activities proposed for the Unit, such as advising divisions and regional commissions and participating in international work on information systems, can be taken up; but in the absence of a proven need for the proposed information system, these ancillary activities could not justify the continued existence of the ISU."

The UNESCO evaluator states that he is in complete agreement with this point.

^{1/} A/32/256 and Add.1; Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/33/7 and Add.2) and ibid., Thirty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 7 A (A/34/7 and Add.2).

5. The Secretary-General states in paragraph 31 of his report that the activities of the Information Systems Unit during the extended period of pilot operation in 1980 have been concentrated in the following areas:

(a) The collection and computerization of material from the Departments of International Economic and Social Affairs and of Technical Co-operation for Development (DIESA and DTCD);

(b) The dissemination of information about DIS and its services;

(c) The provision of services and measurement of the use of the system as requested by the General Assembly.

With regard to the first activity, the Advisory Committee notes that the Secretary-General has not provided any information on the current size of the data base. Such information is contained, however, in the UNESCO evaluator's report. According to the evaluator, as at 1 September 1980, the total size of the data base was not much more than 3,000 items, broken down as follows:

	<u>No. of items</u>	
Centre for Human Settlements	1,350	(backlog and current items)
DTCD	750	
<u>Units of DIESA</u>		
Population Division		(no backlog; current items only)
Office for Science and Technology		(minimal as this unit's documents become United Nations documents and go into the United Nations Bibliographic Information System)
Ocean Economics and Technology Branch	1,000	(minimal as this unit's material is published in journals)
Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs		(minimal since transfer of Centre to Vienna)
	<hr/> 3,100	

6. In the opinion of the UNESCO evaluator, a data base of approximately 3,000 items growing at little more than 1,000 items a year (DTCD - 400 items and DIESA units - 600 items) constitutes a relatively small bank of information. In this connexion,

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the Advisory Committee recalls that at the thirty-third session of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General informed the Committee that some 20,000 pieces of material (6,000 from DIESA and the balance from DTCD) were available for possible processing and that the Information Systems Unit expected to enter some 4,000 items into its DIS by the end of 1979 (A/33/7/Add.2, paras. 3 and 4). In the circumstances, the Advisory Committee concurs with the UNESCO evaluator's conclusion that, bearing in mind that the Information Systems Unit has existed for approximately two and a half years, the progress achieved with DIS has been less than expected, and that it is certainly legitimate to question whether the value of such a limited data base justifies an annual expenditure of \$230,000, which is the estimated cost of operating the Unit in 1981.

7. The Advisory Committee notes that neither the report of the Secretary-General nor the report of the UNESCO evaluator addresses the question whether the material already included in DIS is indeed of permanent value. However, in the light of the statement in the UNESCO evaluator's report that much of what is included in the data base consists of rather informal reports, that material may not be of lasting value.

8. In paragraphs 34 to 47 of his report, the Secretary-General describes how he has disseminated information about DIS and its services through the distribution in May 1980 of a printed brochure, Development Information Abstracts, and a questionnaire to some 1,500 addresses. According to the Secretary-General, distribution of the Development Information Abstracts has created an awareness of DIS and resulted in some 1,000 search requests for specialized bibliographies from respondents (para. 36). Some 318 replies to the questionnaire suggested, inter alia, a potential user profile comprising United Nations family organizations (102), Member States and their permanent missions to the United Nations (72) and research institutes, universities and teaching institutions (144) (para. 40). The UNESCO evaluator states, however, that such evidence of use of DIS as has been obtained is too tentative to allow a definitive evaluation as called for by the General Assembly. The UNESCO evaluator cautions that, although the initial number of requests to be placed on the DIS mailing list and of search requests appear high, there is no evidence that the respondents who have elected to try the service will become regular or repeat users, and that some of the search requests could have been made less out of need than of mere curiosity. In his assessment, the limited scope of the present data base tends to suggest that the audience of potential users may be small.

9. The UNESCO evaluator's conclusion is that, at present, DIS has to be evaluated more in terms of its promise than its achievements. He suggests that the future of the Information Systems Unit and of DIS could perhaps be considered meaningfully within the context of a broader network of development information resources. The Secretary-General appears to anticipate such an eventuality in his outline of possible activities the Information Services Unit could undertake during 1981-1982 should the General Assembly decide to continue the operation of the Unit on a regular basis (para. 65 (a) to (i)). Bearing in mind that the achievements of the Information Systems Unit and of DIS have been below expectations, the Advisory Committee is not convinced that such an approach would be promising. In this connexion, the Advisory Committee draws attention to the experience of the Common Register on Development Activities which was embarked upon without adequate preparation and which remains in the developmental stage despite years of effort and considerable expense.

10. In paragraphs 68 and 69 of his report, the Secretary-General estimates the cost of operation of the Information Systems Unit and DIS in 1980 at \$167,000 (out of voluntary funds totalling some \$193,000). In response to inquiries, the representatives of the Secretary-General informed the Advisory Committee that, as actual expenditure at the end of September amounted to \$144,300 and projected expenditure during the last quarter of 1980 would be \$44,500, the total expenditure for 1980 was now estimated at \$189,300 instead of \$167,000 as reported.

11. In paragraphs 74 and 75 of his report, the Secretary-General provides an estimate of the total cost in 1981 should the General Assembly decide to continue the operation of the Information Systems Unit and DIS under two options involving either the outright purchase or lease of a mini-computer. In this connexion, the Advisory Committee notes that the maintenance cost of the mini-computer under either option is given as \$9,500 per annum without provision for inflation. In response to inquiries, the Advisory Committee was informed that the maintenance cost in 1981 would be \$12,240, rising by from 3 to 5 per cent per year thereafter. Consequently, the total estimated cost of operating the Information Systems Unit and DIS in 1981, should the General Assembly decide to continue its operation on a regular basis, would be \$233,140 under the first option of the purchase of a mini-computer (instead of \$230,400) and \$185,640 under the second option of leasing a mini-computer (instead of \$182,900).

Conclusion

12. In view of the foregoing, the Advisory Committee is of the opinion that the need for the Information Systems Unit and DIS as currently constituted has not been demonstrated. Accordingly, the Advisory Committee recommends that the proposed continuation of the Information Systems Unit by financing it from the regular budget should not be approved.

13. The Advisory Committee was informed by the representatives of the Secretary-General that some 60 per cent of the material already contained in DIS and of items still to be processed relates to technical co-operation activities. As can be seen from paragraph 70 of the Secretary-General's report, arrangements have been made for the reimbursement by DTCD from extrabudgetary funds for work performed in 1980 by the Information Systems Unit. The Secretary-General may wish, therefore, to explore the possibility of continuing the Information Systems Unit on a limited basis in support, particularly, of technical co-operation activities under arrangements whereby the Unit would be reimbursed for its work from extrabudgetary resources at rates to be agreed upon by the users. The Secretary-General could seek to supplement the reimbursement resources by soliciting voluntary funds.
