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IN-DEPTH STUDY OF THE PLANNING PROCESS\*

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report has been prepared in accordance with the decision taken by the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its eighteenth session to make an in-depth study of the planning process at its nineteenth session, on the basis of a report to be prepared by the Secretary-General, in co-operation with other organizations of the United Nations system, and a report by the Joint Inspection Unit. The present report includes a brief history of planning and programming in the United Nations and discusses the functions of a medium-term plan in the United Nations system, weaknesses in the current process, problem areas and alternative approaches to planning.

In an effort to implement the Committee's decision to examine the feasibility of the system of time-limited objectives at the subprogramme level, as recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit, experimental narratives for three programmes are presented in an annex to the present report.

\* Annexes I-IV to the present report will be issued as document  
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## INTRODUCTION

1. In its report on the work of its eighteenth session, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) indicated in paragraph 3 that it had agreed to "carry out an in-depth study of the planning process at its next session, on the basis of a report to be prepared by the Secretary-General in co-operation with the other organizations of the United Nations system, and a report by the Joint Inspection Unit". 1/
2. The present report has been prepared by the Secretary-General in accordance with that decision and after consultation with the secretariats of other organizations within the United Nations system and with those specialized agencies that prepare medium-term plans. The Secretariat and the Joint Inspection Unit also exchanged views concerning the co-ordination of the analytical work, in order to ensure, as far as possible, that the two studies did not overlap.
3. The Committee also decided at its eighteenth session that the feasibility of the system of time-limited objectives at the subprogramme level, recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit in chapter VII of its report on programming and evaluation in the United Nations (E/1978/41 and Corr.1 and 2) should be tested. This experiment should be carried out in the context of the draft medium-term plan for 1982-1985. Analysis should be based on 13 programmes to be presented in accordance with the proposals advanced by the Joint Inspection Unit. 2/
4. When the CPC report was considered by the Fifth Committee, the representative of the Secretary-General stated that the feasibility and value of employing time-limited objectives at the subprogramme level would be tested along with the in-depth study of the planning process. In an effort to implement recommendation 1 of the Joint Inspection Unit, experimental narratives for three programmes are annexed to the present report.

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1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/33/38).

2/ Ibid., para. 10.

I. BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING IN THE UNITED NATIONS

An historical outline of planning and programming in  
the United Nations

5. The idea of planning United Nations programmes for the medium or long term was conceived in the 1960s in the later stages and as a by-product of the debates concerning the introduction of a programme budgeting system into the Organization. This in turn derived from and reflected an increased concern on the part of Member States to establish a clearer picture of the exact relation between the resources they expended on the budget of the Organization and the outputs that it generated through its various programmes and activities. Such a system was thought to be a pre-condition for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of United Nations programmes, thus increasing the degree to which the allocation of resources corresponded with the priority concerns articulated by the intergovernmental bodies. An additional important element in this debate was an increasing interest on the part of Member States in utilizing programming and planning processes as an instrument for improving co-ordination between the activities of United Nations organs and bodies and those of the specialized agencies.

6. These interests and concerns were expressed in General Assembly resolution 2049 (XX) of 13 December 1965, by which the Assembly established the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies. That Committee was asked, inter alia, to examine the entire range of the budgetary problems of the United Nations and to submit, to the Assembly, recommendations on better utilization of the funds available through rationalization and more thorough co-ordination of the activities of the organizations.

7. The Ad Hoc Committee submitted two reports to the General Assembly at its twenty-first session. The first report (A/6289) dealt primarily with the finances and the financial situation of the United Nations; the second (A/6343) presented an extensive set of recommendations on the above-mentioned subjects, including a proposal for long-term planning. The central theme of the recommendations put forward in document A/6343 was the development and adoption of "an integrated system of long-term planning, of programme formulation and of budget preparation". The report further set out, in general terms, some proposed methodologies and procedures to be followed in the formulation of a long-term plan. The General Assembly endorsed these general recommendations in resolution 2150 (XXI) of 4 November 1966.

8. Central to the approach of the Ad Hoc Committee was the presentation of a plan based on an analysis of alternative means and costs of accomplishing specific objectives within a definite time-frame. That plan would, after approval by the governing body of the organization, be integrated into a document with the proposed programme budget drawn up on the basis of the plan. It was suggested that the plan should cover a six-year period; the first two years would be in the form of a biennial programme budget, the second two in the form of a plan, and the third two in the form of a tentative plan. When preparations for a new programme and budget

were under way, the old plan would be revised according to new circumstances, and an additional two-year tentative plan would be drawn up to complete the six-year time-frame.

9. As a first and partial implementation of these recommendations, the General Assembly, by resolution 2370 (XXII) of 19 December 1967, established new budgetary procedures involving the submission, together with the proposed annual budget, of a planning estimate for the succeeding one-year budgetary period on the basis of long-term plans developed by all the relevant programme-formulating bodies, including the Economic and Social Council and the various subsidiary organs, including the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination. However, the development of a system for long-term planning was left to the programme-formulating bodies themselves.

10. The short-comings of this partial approach were pointed out by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and the Economic and Social Council on the basis of a series of reports submitted by the Secretary-General and a most comprehensive report by the Joint Inspection Unit submitted to the General Assembly in 1969 on programming and budgets in the United Nations (A/7822). The report made an explicit proposal for the general adoption of medium-term planning as an element of integrated programme budgeting.

11. Thereafter, the Secretary-General submitted in 1970 and 1971 a further series of reports on the subjects covered by the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, proposing several fundamental changes in the programming and budgeting practices of the Organization. The major one, submitted in April 1972, was entitled "Form of presentation of the United Nations budget and the duration of the budget cycle" (A/C.5/1429). It set out in detail the proposed structure for an integrated budgetary system, including provisions for a six-year medium-term plan and the possible time-table for its implementation.

12. After this report was reviewed by CPC, the Economic and Social Council and the Advisory Committee, the General Assembly unanimously adopted resolution 3043 (XXVII) of 19 December 1972, on the form of presentation of the United Nations budget and duration of the budget cycle, which approved, on an experimental basis, the new form of presentation of the United Nations budget and the introduction of a biennial budget cycle.

13. The resolution shortens the proposed six-year period, in accordance with the view expressed by the Advisory Committee that owing to the lack of expertise and experience among the Secretariat staff, the last two years of the six-year plan would be too sketchy and without practical use. The Advisory Committee further stated that the four-year period could be extended for two more years after the Secretariat had acquired the necessary experience and expertise and recommended that the procedure outlined in General Assembly resolution 2370 (XXII), on the submission of planning estimates for the United Nations regular budget for the second succeeding budgetary period, be applied.

14. On the first attempt to implement this new system - the 1974-1977 medium-term plan, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination observed in its report that "the relationship between the medium-term plan and the biennial work programme and budget should not be one in which the plan is merely a projection of the programme budget, as seems to be the case. Rather, the programme budget should be conceived as an instalment of the plan, with precise identification of resources". 3/

15. The General Assembly, at its twenty-eighth session, adopted resolution 3199 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973, on formulation, review and approval of programmes and budgets, which provided further guidance on the subject of medium-term planning. By this resolution, the General Assembly specifically introduced two new requests - that the Secretary-General evaluate programmes and that the Economic and Social Council establish priorities among the programmes in the economic, social and human rights fields.

16. The subsequent medium-term plan for 1976-1979, submitted to the General Assembly at its thirtieth session, made a plea to legislative bodies to provide guidance to the Secretary-General on three questions of a conceptual nature: (i) the type of commitment represented by the adoption of the plan; (ii) the optimal degree of decentralization for the preparation, adoption and execution of the plan; and (iii) the criteria of choice for determining priorities. On this second attempt, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination "welcomed the improvement in the quality of information and analysis apparent in the medium-term plan and considered that it contained innovative concepts and represented a major contribution towards a proper system of planning in the United Nations". 4/

17. At the thirtieth session the General Assembly had before it another report on the same subject (A/10117) by a Working Group established by the General Assembly to study and recommend means of improving the existing United Nations intergovernmental and expert machinery for the formulation, review, approval and evaluation of programmes and budgets, including the medium-term plan. 5/ Its main concern was that the medium-term plan and the biennial programme budget should be considered by intergovernmental organs in alternate years and that the role of CPC should be strengthened and its work facilitated. On the basis of those reports, the General Assembly adopted resolution 3392 (XXX) of 20 November 1975, in which it decided, inter alia, to consider the medium-term plan and the proposed programme budget in alternate years, beginning in 1976 with a medium-term plan for the period 1978-1981.

18. The third medium-term plan, submitted in 1976 for the period 1978-1981, was the first plan to be prepared and examined prior to rather than at the same time

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3/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 12 (E/5364), para. 25.

4/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Fifty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 7 (E/5632), para. 14.

5/ See decision taken by the General Assembly at its 2324th plenary meeting on 18 December 1974.

as the programme budget of the first biennium covered by the plan. These new arrangements allowed the plan to provide a framework for the formulation and examination of the 1978-1979 programme budget.

19. After examining this medium-term plan and having considered the reports of the Economic and Social Council, CPC and the Advisory Committee thereon, the General Assembly adopted resolution 31/93 of 14 December 1976, entitled "Medium-term plan". That resolution was in fact the first legislation aimed at the codification of the planning process. It provided specific guidelines on the information to be included in the plan, the procedure to be followed in its review and the status to be accorded the plan when approved. Furthermore, it established CPC as the main subsidiary organ of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for planning, programming and co-ordination.

20. The fourth medium-term plan, covering the period 1980-1983, which was submitted to the General Assembly at its thirty-third session, attempted to follow the guidelines provided by the General Assembly in resolution 31/93 and in earlier resolutions on the subject. Although CPC expressed dissatisfaction with the late submission of the plan and the quality of the document, it remained convinced of the need for planning in the United Nations. However, it felt that the techniques and application of medium-term planning in the United Nations required further consideration and re-examination and decided to study the planning process in depth on the basis of two reports - one to be produced by the Secretary-General and the second by the Joint Inspection Unit.

#### Motivations behind the introduction of the system

21. As indicated by the sequence of events reported above, the Assembly embarked on the course of medium-term planning with some circumspection, originally approaching it as an experimental measure. The decisions taken at the outset were on the form of budget presentation, thus implying that the plan, at least initially, was envisaged as a preliminary stage in programme budgeting. One of the main purposes of instituting the medium-term plan was to justify the utility and utilization of budget appropriations by giving a preliminary account of the programmes. Since there were many reasons for instituting planning, choices had to be made as to which objectives were paramount when deciding on the type of planning. Those planning procedures that best serve the functions of financial control and programme implementation monitoring may not be the best if the primary goal is responsiveness to the changing programme requirements of deliberative intergovernmental bodies. It was not easy to achieve both objectives in the same type of plan, as demonstrated in later sections of the present report.

22. In the early stages, it was recognized that in spite of the growth in the funds expended by the United Nations for various activities, especially the expansion of activities in the field of economic and social development, the response of the Organization to the requirements of the developing countries was far from adequate. But it was also recognized that this expansion of activities did not necessarily reflect systematic forward thinking. Consequently, there was a concern that resources might not have been consumed in the most effective way or that there might be duplication of work owing to lack of co-ordination and over-all planning.

23. The budgetary growth of the 1950s and 1960s had given rise to a certain amount of concern, and it was feared that policies to control the growth under an "object of expenditure" system might take the form of arbitrary trimming across the board, which would cut into the best programmes as well as into marginal ones. In response to that problem one objective of medium-term planning was to introduce an orderly and controlled development of activities. It was hoped also that the medium-term plan could be the instrument through which the setting of priorities among programmes, often attempted but never really achieved, would become an orderly and relatively easy process.

24. Although the hope was also expressed that the medium-term plan would act as a vehicle for the reconciliation of any inconsistencies between central and decentralized mandates, it must be recognized that planning models, appealing to "rationality" as their central concept, are implicitly predicated on a consensus view of the problem to be solved. The degree to which consensus can be achieved, however, is very much dependent on the level of detail presented in the plan. The more detailed the planning document, the more difficult it is to achieve a consensus. Consequently, the degree to which the plan could serve as a tool for reconciliation of divergencies between central and decentralized mandates is also dependent on the degree of detail contained in the planning document.

25. Finally, it was felt that the design of programmes generally was not done with sufficient attention to determination of the most economical way of carrying out activities and the most effective methods of implementation, with an assessment of the ultimate impact. It was expected that the medium-term planning exercise would help detect alternate and more efficient strategies and provide the Secretariat with a management tool to improve the over-all effectiveness of the Organization's activities.

26. In summary, the introduction of the planning and programming system was intended to ensure more orderly, systematic and efficient design, formulation, adoption and implementation of programmes in the United Nations and in the United Nations system; to facilitate monitoring of their implementation and their evaluation; to enable obsolete, marginally useful or ineffective activities to be eliminated; and to make budgetary discussions programme-oriented. It had been explained, on various occasions, that such planning was not necessarily intended to reduce the amount of resources allocated to a particular programme or set of programmes but rather to concentrate the use of limited resources on the most timely, suitable and effective activities and to reflect intergovernmental priorities more accurately.

#### Discrepancies between the expectations and the results

27. Since the General Assembly adopted resolution 3043 (XXVII) of 19 December 1972, instituting a planning and programme budgeting system, six years have elapsed, four medium-term plans have been drawn up by the Secretariat and considered by the competent intergovernmental bodies, four biennial programme budgets have been prepared in the framework of medium-term plans and approved by the General Assembly,



and 11 programmes have been subjected to evaluation. Over the past six years, in the course of applying the guidelines set by the General Assembly concerning the frequency of and machinery for decision-taking, a form and content for medium-term planning documents, a method for consideration by the competent bodies and a system of liaison with the programme budget have all gradually evolved and programme managers have gained experience in the use of the system. However, discussions and reports of the various intergovernmental bodies that have dealt with the medium-term plans, the criticisms expressed concerning the documents submitted and concerning the use made of them, including the criticisms of the Joint Inspection Unit, the difficulties encountered by the Secretariat in the utilization of this tool and the very decision by the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination that forms the basis for the present report, all show that the present situation is not considered entirely satisfactory.

28. The general feeling is that the time has come to rethink current practices in the planning and programming of United Nations activities. In particular the following deficiencies have to be considered:

(a) The current planning process offers a detailed description of programme activities. However, this requires the application of detailed planning to future circumstances that cannot be reasonably predicted;

(b) It appears that programme managers in the Secretariat have had difficulties in perceiving or using the plan as a management tool. Furthermore, they have had difficulties in presenting a document that the intergovernmental bodies would consider useful as a tool or instrument in the implementation of their decisions on priorities. In view of the conflicting requests arising from divergent conceptions of the purpose of the plan, it is very often seen as an administrative burden superimposed on programme activities which, instead of helping, competes with the implementation of substantive tasks;

(c) The growth of the United Nations budget has been controlled, at least at the level of the proposed programme budget; however, this has been achieved through the establishment of over-all limits rather than through an orderly redeployment of resources;

(d) Although setting priorities through relative growth rates has always been subject to question and doubt in some quarters, the Secretariat has continued to use this approach as a guide to budget preparation. It is the only approach to priority setting that has ever been operationalized, although its bluntness is well recognized;

(e) Little or no progress has been made in streamlining interaction between central and decentralized programme-formulating organs. The latter continue to pass new legislation without referring to or even taking note of the medium-term plan. This could in part be due to the problems arising from scheduling meetings without taking into account the review process required for the medium-term plan. There is also little evidence of concrete proposals for the integration of decentralized activities as envisaged in General Assembly resolution 31/93;

(f) Prior consultation procedures on medium-term plans have not yet gone a long way towards system-wide programme co-ordination as envisaged in General Assembly resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977, on restructuring.

#### Summary

29. This chapter has attempted to consider what was expected, or could be expected from the introduction of a programme-planning system. It briefly provides some possible explanations of how and why the existing system fails to achieve the objectives sought, or fills only to a partial extent the role originally envisaged for it. There appears to be reason to believe that the various proponents of the system were motivated by different and sometimes conflicting considerations, not all of which could be resolved by the adoption of any one planning procedure; perhaps some of the problems intended to be solved are, in fact, insoluble.

30. Planning as an organizational operation and management tool produces certain benefits. But it also has intrinsic limitations, however it is approached. The United Nations is a uniquely complex organization, or set of organizations, given the number of intergovernmental organs comprised, the number of sectors and activities covered, the political standpoints accepted, the geographical regions represented and the expectations entertained, among other factors. It too has its own inherent limitations, arising partly from the constraints each of the above factors places on the others. Thus the interaction of planning procedures, with their limitations, and the complex United Nations system, with its limitations, produces a unique problem, for which no outside solution can possibly be imposed. Whatever solutions are possible, they will have to be worked out patiently over time, within the Organization through a continual learning process involving the Secretariat in general, as well as the responsible programme formulating bodies and the planning specialists in particular. It is, however, clear that the development of planning procedures has to be an in-house activity. If this study were confined exclusively to technical aspects and problems, and simply proposed refinements that were theoretically valid but could, in some cases, prove impracticable, it would not be entirely fulfilling the mandate given to the Secretary-General.

## II. THE FUNCTIONS OF A MEDIUM-TERM PLAN IN THE UNITED NATIONS

31. Given the wide variety of activities undertaken by the United Nations, the functions of medium-term planning could vary, to a certain extent, according to the nature of characteristics of the work involved. Each type of activity might call for particular emphasis on one or a few functions. Furthermore, certain activities could not be planned at all. A detailed discussion on the different characteristics of various activities will follow in Section III. Section II is an analysis of the general functions applicable to almost all the activities involved.

32. It must also be borne in mind in studying the planning procedure in accordance with the mandate received from CPC, that this procedure is only part of a broader system encompassing planning, programming, budgeting and evaluation. While recognizing the importance of its relation to other instruments, this study will focus on the role and specific functions of the medium-term plan. These functions are summed up below.

33. The General Assembly, in paragraph 3 (c) of resolution 31/93 defined the medium-term plan once approved by the Assembly as "the principal policy directive of the United Nations". In order to meet this definition the plan should accomplish the following:

(a) The medium-term plan analysis of a programme should be centred on the policy of the Organization with regard to the programme area addressed, and in the case of world, regional or national problems, should describe the strategy to be followed in that sector in order to alleviate the particular problems addressed or bring their solution nearer. Such a strategy would, as a rule, encompass a series of successive medium-term "operations", the first of which would be described in some detail in the plan under review. The later stages would be described briefly in terms of an outline and general objectives, so that the long-term coherence of the programme could be clearly seen;

(b) The planning review process should thus enable the competent intergovernmental bodies to make decisions on the content of medium-term programmes. This process would include the decisions of the central intergovernmental bodies on priorities, where meaningful, between programmes, and of the decentralized bodies on priorities within programmes;

(c) The medium-term operation is to aim at translating existing legislative mandates into objectives for organizational action. The definition of the objectives should provide for a means of assuring that they have been attained;

(d) The preparation of the plan should give the Secretariat under the direction of the Secretary-General an opportunity to propose ways of translating existing legislative mandates into concrete objectives attainable by the Organization; the consideration of the plan is supposed to enable the legislative

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organs to confirm, reject or alter these objectives and thereby specify the role to be played by the Organization in that particular field;

(e) The plan should enable the Secretariat to identify gaps in legislative mandates or lack of complementarity among the mandates from various legislative organs so that legislative organs can take appropriate action thereon;

(f) The plan should provide a framework for the preparation of biennial programme budgets, generate guidelines that the competent intergovernmental organs, at various levels, would give to the Secretariat for the formulation of shorter-term programmes (biennial programmes in the budget and supporting work programmes), and make it possible to verify that the activities and outputs described in the budget are consistent with the strategies for action and conducive to the attainment of the objectives;

(g) The plan should provide preliminary and global indicators of the resources needed to implement the proposed programmes;

(h) The planning process is expected to help the Organization to improve its effectiveness. In concrete terms, assuming sufficient administrative flexibility exists, the planning system as a whole - that is, the sequence of medium-term plan, programme budget and work plans - should provide substantive staff with a management tool, enabling them to follow up and monitor the performance of activities and take stock at suitable intervals, through programme performance reporting;

(i) The description and analysis of programmes or their components should involve sufficient data to make it possible, at the subsequent evaluation stage, to determine the impact and effectiveness of programmes and to decide how they should be continued or redirected, or whether they should be discontinued; 6/

(j) The formulation of the medium-term plan is to serve as an instrument to improve programme co-ordination with other organizations in the United Nations system.

The 10 points listed above may not cover all aspects of the role that could be played by a medium-term plan in an international organization.

34. Some of these functions have been performed, at least to some extent, satisfactorily. Others have not been performed satisfactorily, although they could have been under certain conditions. Others, again, could be considered "ideal" functions that have encountered obstacles that can only be overcome in the longer term.

35. It is also possible, and the present report will illustrate this point, that not all the potential functions of a plan can be served by a single type of document. If that is the case, a choice will have to be made: it will be necessary to decide which functions are most important and to conclude what kind of exercise and what type of document should be selected.

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6/ A distinction should be made between the effect - that is, what actually happened, and the impact, or the degree to which the programmes achieved their objectives.

### III. WEAKNESSES OF THE CURRENT PROCESS

36. The criticisms of the current planning process relate to a number of topics, most of which, mutatis mutandis, recur in the discussions of various bodies, in the reports of the Joint Inspection Unit and within the Secretariat.

#### The involvement of intergovernmental bodies in the planning process

37. The first source of difficulty is the process by which the intergovernmental bodies might implement, at various stages, their proposed reformulations of the draft plan submitted by the Secretary-General. At present their participation in the reformulation process is considered both inadequate and poorly organized. The Committee for Programme and Co-ordination has repeatedly deplored the fact that the Secretariat submits the medium-term plan to it as a finished product; the only courses of action left open have been either to accept or reject the proposed package programme and, if rejected, to reformulate it. In the latter event, CPC has no opportunity to consider the new version prior to its submission to the General Assembly. CPC clearly wishes to have an opportunity to make its views known during the programme-formulation process and to exert an influence on the identification of strategies. During that phase, it could more effectively perform one of its most important functions - namely, to ensure that the translation of existing legislative mandates into medium-term objectives by the Secretariat is done in the way intended by the legislative bodies.

38. Several intergovernmental bodies periodically - annually or biennially - formulate programmes of activities on the basis of proposals submitted by the Secretariat, in implementation of legislative mandates adopted at different levels (central, sectoral or regional). The decentralized bodies enjoy a considerable measure of de facto autonomy in defining their programmes: they report to the Economic and Social Council and submit their programmes for approval to the Council or to the General Assembly. The sectoral and regional secretariats undertake activities under the authority of the body formulating the programme, within the limits of available resources.

39. However, the time-tables for the programme planning cycles of the regional and sectoral decentralized bodies are drawn up in terms of the needs, preferences and constraints of each of these bodies and do not necessarily fit in with the time-table for the preparation and consideration of the medium-term plan at the central level. The situation could arise, and indeed has, when two separate chronological cycles for programme planning co-exist to some extent. For example, there have been occasions when the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination, at a meeting devoted to consideration of the medium-term plan, has been informed that a work programme, differing from the programme set out in the plan document and partly covering the same period as the plan, had already been approved by another body.

40. This situation is not conducive to an orderly planning process. If such procedures were typical, and if the disparities between programmes considered in separate forums were substantial, the very notion of medium-term planning as now conceived would lose much of its validity. Fortunately this is not the case.

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41. In view of the existing co-ordinating links and the general level of mutual understanding between the functional and regional bodies and the central organization, the differences between the programmes and plans drawn up by these bodies and those prepared by the central organs have so far mostly been of a superficial, presentational nature. Every effort, including the use of an improved programming procedure, is required to encourage consistency in the form of presentation, which will help substantive co-ordination significantly.

42. At the central level, the Economic and Social Council and the Main Committees of the General Assembly quite often adopt resolutions launching new activities at the subprogramme level or add objectives to existing programmes or subprogrammes without placing them in the perspective of the existing medium-term plan. Such a practice in effect results in two parallel planning systems: one, the medium-term plan, dealing with already established and more or less continuing programmes, which has been considered but has not yet been adopted, thus casting some doubts on the validity of the plan as a legislative authority; the second, the set of action-oriented resolutions adopted at each session (including that during which the medium-term plan is considered), dealing with fresh activities currently attracting particular attention and newly initiated, which in two years are likely to be relegated to the routing of the medium-term plan. The issue here is the reluctance of both central and decentralized intergovernmental bodies to commit themselves and to tie their own hands for the two-year interval between the preparation of two successive plans.

43. It has often been remarked that the world situation is changing very rapidly and that United Nations activities must at all times be in a position to adjust to new situations. On the other hand, as pointed out elsewhere, few United Nations activities - especially perhaps in the social and other sectors, where medium-term planning is most obviously appropriate - are changed so suddenly and fundamentally as to invalidate the programme objectives. This problem will be dealt with in greater detail below in paragraphs 77 and 78, when the rigidity and flexibility of the plan are discussed. From the resolutions and decisions taken by the General Assembly on medium-term planning, it appears that the Assembly favours the possibility of introducing some chronological order into the consideration of the plan at different levels, so that the conclusions of decentralized bodies on programming matters can be included. Certainly this is true in principle. The main cost would be in the lead-time necessary to prepare the document. Some detailed consideration is given to this issue in section V and annex II of the present report.

44. The Working Group on the United Nations programme and Budget Machinery, established by the General Assembly at its twenty-ninth session, devoted part of its report (A/10117) to the discussion of this problem. According to the formula proposed in the report, it was foreseen that the calendar of work for the preparation and review of the medium-term plan would cover a period of about 20 months (from May to December of the following year), the first half of that period being devoted to the formulation of programme analyses and their co-ordination within the Secretariat, the last 10 months being devoted to the review process by the competent central intergovernmental organs. 7/

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7/ See A/10117, annex II.

Any inputs from decentralized bodies would have to take place during the first stages.

45. However, the beginning of the preparation work for the 1978-1981 plan, which was the first to be prepared according to the recommendations of the Working Group, had to wait for the General Assembly's approval and was delayed until November 1975 instead of being launched in May of that year. Again, while the preparation process for the 1980-1983 medium-term plan should have started in May 1977, it was necessary to wait until the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations was sufficiently under way before it could be launched. Eventually, the total time available for the preparation of these two medium-term plans was reduced to about 16 weeks. <sup>8/</sup> So far, in the history of medium-term planning in the United Nations, neither technical committees nor the major decentralized organs, except in rare cases, have been in a position to reshape the draft medium-term plan early enough and to make a significant substantive input of their own.

46. In some cases, these organs review the medium-term plan in the final form in which it has been considered by the General Assembly and after the General Assembly has considered it. In other cases, they do not even review it formally. This accounts for the fact that when these organs later decide on their work plan for the year or the biennium, they do not refer to the medium-term plan. If it had been possible for them to participate in the formulation of the medium-term programme during the preparation process, they would more likely be able to conform to it at a later stage.

47. When preparing the draft medium-term plan, the substantive units of the Secretariat certainly strive to reflect, to the best of their ability, the views of decentralized organs on the orientation of their activities in the medium term. However, such an interpretation, even when it is as faithful as possible, cannot replace a debate and formal statements of views on a draft text.

#### The medium-term plan as a tool for programme review

48. The second source of difficulty is the document in which the medium-term plan is presented. Here the criticism centres not so much on the logic of the analyses and format but rather on the quality of the narratives that make up the content. Whatever formal approach is adopted, a good programme can be badly presented and vice-versa. However, some of the criticisms of the narratives might seem contradictory. Some feel that the narratives are too long, while others feel that they do not provide enough information. The document is generally considered too lengthy and too detailed to enable the central organs to arrive at a reasoned opinion within the severely restricted time-frame in which they have to work. The basic paradox is that informed decisions by definition require information, and it takes space to transmit information and time to digest it. The question is, therefore, exactly what information these bodies need and what can be provided. The answer can be derived only from an analysis of what decisions they have to take.

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<sup>8/</sup> The Secretary-General's instructions to secretariats, departments and offices were issued for the 1978-1981 plans on 12 November 1975; for the 1980-1983 plan, on 3 October 1977. In both cases, the deadline for sending the manuscript for reproduction was mid-February.

49. Sometimes the competent technical bodies meet at a time when the text of the medium-term plan is available, but the presentation of the programme they actually review has a different format. This has been the source of some criticism, occasionally expressed but more often implicit in other assessments. It appears that the staff of these bodies might not be familiar enough with the global medium-term programme document that is considered almost exclusively by the principal regional, sectoral and central bodies.

50. It has been pointed out that the technical bodies and the central organs might well have different information needs when considering programmes but that a compromise document designed to suit the needs of all might eventually satisfy none. A parallel or alternative compromise might be made at the programme design stage, but this might still be open to the same objection concerning compromise choices in general. If a clear-cut conceptual distinction was made at the programme level between a short-term work plan and a medium-term programme, the latter document, which would be of a general nature, could very well be submitted to and considered by the central organs, who could concentrate upon broader policy issues and the interrelations between programmes; the short-term work plan could then be a detailed document that would serve the information needs of the technical bodies at their level and would not then overburden the agenda of the central bodies. The conceptual difference would be based not only on the difference in time-frame but also on the level of appropriate detail.

51. One frequently expressed criticism is lack of clarity in the subprogramme narratives. Attention has often been drawn to the vagueness of the analyses, and the following factors seem to be the most serious:

(a) The statement of objectives, often closely paraphrasing the resolutions of legislative bodies, is extremely ambitious and actually indicates very long-term general goals completely beyond the scope of the results that can be expected from programmes over a four-year period. The concept of a "two-level" statement of objectives has been suggested as worthy of consideration. First, there would be a generalized statement of purpose, or basic mission, and then very specific, time-limited programme objectives would be presented as a separate component where feasible;

(b) When the proposed objectives seem only reasonably ambitious, they are not really objectives but more in the nature of a continuing function of the Organization (such as "assisting Governments in ..."), for which it is impossible to set a time-limit without a more extensive analysis;

(c) The section entitled "Problems addressed" very often describes an economic and social situation or gives an account of the current state of knowledge and scientific tools available, which are not likely to change radically over the medium-term, although this does not affect its intrinsic importance;

(d) Consequently, the proposed strategy appears out of line with the objectives, when it really is a true strategy. Quite often, however, the section entitled "Strategy" contains little more than general statements of



activities that are expected to be carried out in the medium-term period; or it may contain a description of the continuing functions of the Organization within the framework of the programme considered. One reason for the vagueness of the narrative in the strategy section is that under its current conception, the plan is to be a binding framework for the programme proposals in the subsequent budget. The programme managers are placed in the position of having to formulate a strategy that is sufficiently vague to cover all the activities they might be required to undertake during the subsequent four to six years. There is also a technical difficulty of projecting activities with any precision so far into the future. There is a fundamental problem as well, concerning the appropriate level of aggregation of activities about which specific statements can meaningfully be made. Clearly it is easier to be more specific at the programme-element level than at the subprogramme level as presently conceived;

(e) As both CPC and the Joint Inspection Unit have commented, the section entitled "Expected impact" often does no more than state that the activities undertaken will facilitate progress towards the distant goals set under the heading "Objectives". Presented in this way, the statement, which is probably never completely untrue, looks like wishful thinking, because it does not specify either the extent of the progress or what the intermediate stages are supposed to be, nor does it state how progress will be measured.

52. In the case of programmes, the major criticisms concerning content, descriptive accuracy and form of presentation relate to the section on co-ordination and to the division of programmes into subprogrammes. The section on co-ordination, which often merely contains a statement to the effect that "co-ordination is ensured" and a list of units with which such co-ordination is ensured and indicates the administrative procedures employed (meetings and exchanges of documents or data). This information is certainly very useful at the time when the plan is considered. At the same time, certain aspects of substantive co-ordination should be analysed and presented more fully. These include (a) the delimitation of areas of concern shared by several major programmes or by other agencies in the system, (b) the criteria for apportioning the over-all task among the various units concerned (geographical distribution, analysis/synthesis, respective fields of competence or interests and comparative effectiveness, for example) and (c) the actual allocation of responsibilities for this task, which are only occasionally mentioned at present. One exception has been the treatment of research activities designed from the outset to cover all sectors of the Organization or to involve all the agencies in the system. <sup>9/</sup> Generally, the intergovernmental bodies have considered the technical co-ordination of these activities (apportionment of tasks, scheduling of inputs) to be satisfactory.

53. An examination of the appropriate division of programmes into subprogrammes raises the basic question, so far unresolved, of whether the administrative structure should be adapted to the programme structure or vice-versa, or whether the kind of compromise that now exists should be continued. When the programmatic and administrative structures coincide, it is obviously much easier to both monitor activities and co-ordinate subprogrammes. However, where subprogrammes are grouped to form an essentially non-homogeneous programme in one administrative unit, or

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<sup>9/</sup> Such as the review and appraisal operations in connexion with the United Nations Development Decades.

where subprogrammes are spread across different administrative units, serious organizational problems of various kinds arise. These could include difficulties in the formulation of objectives or a conflict of interests in the allocation of resources and responsibility.

54. From this brief analysis of some of the perceived weaknesses of the document it is possible to discern some of the reasons why the plan is both too lengthy and not sufficiently informative. The document is patterned too closely on the administrative structure, is repetitious and contains non-essential features that could well be eliminated. By describing every two years, in great detail, (a) the administrative structure of the Secretariat carrying out activities under the programme, (b) the formal co-ordination procedures and (c) the economic and social situation and problems in the sector covered by the subprogramme, the narratives accompanying the medium-term plan are likely to be a repetition, to a large extent, of the previous plan document. It must be borne in mind that a significant proportion of both programmes and subprogrammes are made up of continuing activities and that, apart from details referring to and deriving from up-dating procedures, the narrative in these cases will inevitably be repetitious for the most part.

#### Gaps in the programme planning and evaluation cycle

55. The inadequate integration of the programming procedure was mentioned recently in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on programming and evaluation (E/1978/41 and Corr. 1 and 2) and in chapter II of the medium-term plan for the period 1980-1983 (A/33/6 (part 2)). 10/ Various deficiencies are mentioned. Those that relate to the plan in particular are as follows:

(a) Lack of consistency between the plan and the budget in terms of programme structure;

(b) Difficulties encountered in the use of the plan as a tool for determining relative priorities;

(c) Insufficient linkage between cost estimates for programmes (over the planning period) and resources requested and obtained in the subsequent programme budgets;

(d) The fact that the internal evaluation exercises have not resulted in any great improvement in the programmes evaluated. Not enough has been learned from the exercise to create a feedback loop allowing for the reformulation of programmes while in operation.

56. The formats of the budget and the plan are not identical: whereas the budget is presented by section and administrative unit, the plan is presented by major programme and programme. The difference in format is the direct result of General Assembly resolutions and decisions on the medium-term planning process. The reasons why the budget does not have the same structure as the plan are

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10/ To be issued as Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No.6 (A/33/6/Rev.1).

financial in nature and derive from an effort to administer and monitor appropriations and expenditures effectively. While these differences are likely to persist, they should not interfere with the derivation of the budget from the programme.

57. The subprogramme was chosen as the main unit for analysis and review in the plan for the technical reasons explained in paragraphs 114 and 115 of the medium-term plan for the period 1978-1981. 11/ It was found satisfactory by CPC and is in keeping with the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination's recommendations on programming. The choice of the programme as the main unit of financial analysis in the budget also derives from technical, budgetary and financial considerations. However, in the programme budget for 1980-1981, the analysis of activities will also come under the heading of the subprogramme. The comparability of the two documents will therefore be guaranteed, in principle, in the programme narrative.

58. The identification of the relative priorities of programmes and the probable effects on relative growth rates in budgetary resources has, from the outset, been a function assigned to the planning procedure. The Secretariat has proposed a methodology for priority-setting based on a number of criteria. 12/ Although not unanimously accepted, this method was considered acceptable by CPC and the legislative organs, and after consideration of the draft medium-term plan for 1978-1981, the General Assembly, in paragraph 1 of resolution 31/93, decided that the budget for 1978-1979 should be drawn upon the basis of the relative growth rates recommended by CPC.

59. When the plan for 1980-1983 was considered, no specific decision was taken to this effect, and it was apparent from the debate in CPC and the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly that the method of identifying priorities and relative growth rates still posed problems that had been recognized from the outset but had not yet been fully resolved.

60. One of the main reasons for this may be the intrinsic difficulty of attempting to apply very different relative growth rates of resources in a period of low real budgetary growth. It is more difficult to reduce, in absolute terms, the resources allocated to a programme than to limit their increase to a below-average rate, in a situation where this still represents an increase in real resources.

61. The inclusion of financial data in the plan was envisaged originally as a means of informing Member States of the probable cost of programmes during the planned period. 13/ In paragraph 3 (a) of resolution 31/93, the General Assembly decided that the plan should include "preliminary and approximate indications of

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11/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Supplement No. 6A (A/31/6/Add.1).

12/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Supplement No. 6A (A/31/6/Add.1), vol. II.

13/ See "Second report of the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies, containing recommendations submitted to the General Assembly at its twenty-first session" (A/6343).

future costs ... as a whole and by major programmes'. The discussion in CPC and the General Assembly, and the reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, have highlighted certain limitations in the usefulness of the financial data contained in the plan. Most of the criticisms have taken the general form of questioning the appropriateness of the amount of financial detail given, and its value at a time of world inflation and currency instability.

62. In its report (A/6343), the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies conceived of systematic programme evaluation as part and parcel of the "planning, programming and evaluation" cycle and mentioned some examples of evaluation exercises within the United Nations. The introduction of an evaluation component was regarded as essential in order to complete the feedback loop whereby programme managers and staff can learn from their own earlier experiences in a systematic manner. 14/ However, it is not until November 1975 that we find, in an addendum to the 1974-1975 budget performance report, a first attempt at evaluation at the programme level and an account of the inadequacy of the means of evaluation available in the Secretariat (A/10035/Add.1).

63. In 1976, at its sixteenth session, CPC explained the concepts of internal and external evaluation, and it designated a limited number of programmes (three or four) to be subjected each year to an internal evaluation exercise on a cyclical basis, so that in a number of years all (or most) programmes would be subjected to evaluation. It also recommended that the Joint Inspection Unit should assist in external evaluation. 15/ At its thirty-first session, in resolution 31/93 the General Assembly approved that recommendation. The external evaluation exercise carried out by the Joint Inspection Unit concluded with proposals for major changes in the design and organization of the programme evaluated.

64. Partly because the reports on the internal evaluation exercises are not always published jointly with the medium-term plan that follows them, or because the implications of the exercise are not highlighted enough in the consideration of the next plan, these reports have not yet had significant impact on the programmes evaluated. In order to achieve this impact, the conclusions of intergovernmental bodies on any prior evaluation exercise must be made fully available and be appropriately emphasized at the beginning of the narrative of that particular programme in the following medium-term plan. The extent to which the

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14/ This requires, in turn, that evaluation procedures include not only descriptions of the degree to which the originally specified objective or impact was attained, but also an explanation of any discrepancy - that is, both how and why. Thus, failure to achieve objectives completely is not necessarily failure in any absolute sense. Indeed, if all objectives were to be achieved all the time, one could probably infer either that the objectives were too vague to be genuinely verifiable or too modest and easily attained to be valuable.

15/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/31/38).

information derived from the exercise is used by programme managers for subsequent improvements - that is, as a learning process for themselves - could be ascertained ultimately to some degree by comparing the descriptions of the strategies "before" and "after" the evaluation. 16/ While it might be unjustified to state that the internal evaluation exercises have not provided any input into subsequent programming, it could be said that the procedures utilized do not provide a sufficiently clear picture of the sequence of causes (evaluation) and effects (changes in the programme) or of long-term impact; nor do they provide any guarantee that such a procedure will be followed.

Limitations of medium-term planning as a tool for the  
system-wide harmonization of programmes

65. It was expected from the outset that long-term or medium-term planning would be conducive to better co-ordination of the work of the various organizations in the system. 17/ These expectations have not declined since the General Assembly endorsed, in resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977, the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Restructuring of the Economic and Social Sectors of the United Nations System, paragraph 61 (b) of which proposes the introduction of system-wide medium-term planning at the earliest possible time.

66. The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) reported to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination, at its seventeenth session, 18/ on experience in the utilization of programme planning documents for purposes of co-ordination, particularly in the form of prior consultations on work programmes, programme budgets and medium-term plans. The obstacles to the prior consultation procedure referred to in the ACC report are as follows:

(a) Lack of comparability of the documents, owing mainly to the different conceptions of the governing organs of agencies as to the purposes and functions to be served by medium-term planning; 19/

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16/ It may be useful to note that the processes of monitoring implementation and output, on the one hand, and the evaluation of impact, on the other, are substantially different. In the formulation of the medium-term plan so far it has proved difficult for programme staff to link "outputs" with "impact", and thereby demonstrate "effectiveness". Both further study and further staff training in the approach to this question will clearly be needed.

17/ See paras. 69 and 73 of the second report of the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts (A/6343).

18/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-second Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/32/38).

19/ The significance of these different perceptions emerges at several points in the present report.

(b) Difficulties encountered in attempts at harmonization because of the fact that planning concepts and techniques are still evolving;

(c) The low priority and insufficient time given in many cases to the consultation procedure.

A cursory review of the present situation with regard to medium-term planning in the major agencies shows that the original obstacles still exist.

67. Medium-term planning in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) over the past decade has gone through a considerable evolution, ranging from detailed subprogramme presentations with indications of resource requirements or growth rates to broad unquantified programme objectives. FAO now prepares a brief and concise biennial document on medium-term objectives in a format determined by its governing bodies. The next FAO medium-term objectives document will present global objectives of member countries over the next six years and will discuss ongoing and proposed FAO activities necessary to support the attainment of these objectives.

68. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization draws up a fixed-horizon plan with a duration of six years. It is revised after two years and after four years. The first plan covered the period 1977-1982. A draft adjustment to the medium term plan (20/C.4/I) was submitted to the General Conference at its twentieth session and adopted. The scope of the adjustment was indeed limited. Out of 44 objectives, one was terminated, one was added and three objectives were reformulated. As mandated, the Director-General of UNESCO submitted at the same time document 20/C.4/II, which through a broad analysis of the world situation and problems in the fields of competence of UNESCO, confirms the continuing relevance of the main orientations of the first medium-term plan.

69. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) now prepares a fixed-horizon six-year plan, which is updated as necessary after two years and again after four years. The shift away from a six-year rolling plan toward a fixed-horizon six-year plan started in 1976, when the ILO updated its 1976-1981 plan instead of submitting a new one. A six-year plan was to have been prepared in 1978 for 1980-1985, but owing to financial circumstances, this was not done. The first fixed-horizon six-year plan will cover the 1982-1987 period.

70. In the context of system-wide harmonization of programmes, General Assembly resolution 32/197 on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system laid stress on the promotion of joint planning. Joint planning could cover a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from the grouping together of approved programmes under agreed headings (e.g., the integrated reports in the areas of outer space activities and natural resources), efforts to achieve cohesion between approved programmes (e.g., the five-year programmes on statistical activities), consultations on draft programme documents that can be modified in order to develop co-ordinated and complementary programmes, formulation of joint programme proposals, elaboration of joint statements of

objectives (such as those in rural development), 20/ followed by the building-up of proposed programme structure around those objectives, to the agreed allocations of programme activities among organizations for action by governing bodies and implementation. Prior consultations on the medium-term plan still have an essential role to play in this respect, since they make it possible to identify areas of activity in which specific operations would be useful and feasible.

71. Whatever approaches and formats will be utilized in initiating specific joint planning exercises, they will evidently be facilitated by a greater degree of comparability between the plans of the various organizations in the system. This aspect would, in the light of General Assembly resolution 32/197, seem to be an important consideration in analysing possible changes in the approach to medium-term planning adopted by the United Nations.

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20/ This was supported by ACC in its report: "The ACC believes in addition that as coherent groups of objectives are agreed for international co-operation in particular areas (for example, in a new international development strategy) it should become possible to embody them in compatible form in medium-term plans. This process should be facilitated by the continuing efforts of intergovernmental organs to develop such objectives" (E/1978/43/Add.2, para. 33).

#### IV. EXPLORING PROBLEM AREAS

##### The rationale of medium-term programme planning

72. The adoption of the medium-term programme planning system was intended inter alia to rationalize and unify two processes that had existed to some degree without being fully developed or appropriately interlinked. One component, the short-term programming exercise that takes place at the regional and central secretariat level, has an annual or a biennial basis and enables the technical and functional subsidiary bodies and the relevant secretariat units to decide on the specifics of the list of programme elements to be implemented during the following years. <sup>21/</sup> The second component, formulating longer-term objectives, policies and strategies for action, has been under development in some fields since the early 1970s, but never in a systematic fashion. One of the main problems now to be solved in order to improve the situation further is to make the two components systematic, compatible and clearly related in such a way that the first derives logically from the second. This is not yet the case.

73. In practice, the partnerships between the functional commissions, all the sectoral or regional technical bodies and the competent substantive units have not reflected accurately the assumptions underlying the new procedure. The medium-term plan has been viewed as an independent exercise but conceptually approached as an extension of the existing form of annual programming to a four-year time-frame. The result has left much to be desired. At the programme level (level 2 in the hierarchy of programmes), the practice of drawing up a detailed programme proper each year was continued, and for the purposes of the plan, a detailed description of activities spanning a period of four years and describing hypothetical but probable programme elements for the last two or three years of the four-year period was produced. These hypothetical elements in the plan were subsequently replaced by real elements when the short-term annual or biennial programmes were decided at the regular meetings of the functional commissions and technical bodies.

74. However, the introduction of evaluation into the system will add a new dimension to the planning process; this may require the concept of the medium-term plan to be extended, if not changed, for several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, evaluation comprises both description and explanation, in the scientific sense of an examination of reasons for the effect and impact of a programme, subprogramme or programme element. This automatically brings about a deeper understanding of the workings of and probably the external constraints upon any programme or subprogramme. Secondly, the design and analysis of programmes would both have to be carried out in a way that would make subsequent evaluation

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<sup>21/</sup> On the basis of the CPC recommendation in the report on its eighteenth session (Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/33/38)), in turn based on the format recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit for programme implementation schedules, this has already been developed and is being applied in the Secretariat.



feasible and meaningful. One of the chief purposes of the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit and CPC in advocating a system of time-limited objectives is to facilitate the application of evaluation methods and procedures.

75. By now three medium-term plan documents containing programme narratives have been prepared. Each of them analyses every programme within an identical framework. Although the form of presentation may have changed from one document to the next, it is possible to make a rough comparison of the three documents prepared and reviewed over a period of approximately four years and covering the planning period extending from 1976 to 1983. Each of the analyses is organized into five subheadings: (i) the objectives pursued; (ii) the problems addressed; (iii) the legislative authority; (iv) the strategies and the activities designed for their attainment; and (v) the expected impact.

76. So far, experience has been too limited to allow for general conclusions. Some examples, as shown in a tentative analysis of six programmes and subprogrammes in the economic and social fields, are given in annex I of the present report. There, several programmes, which are not necessarily a representative sample, show that in some respects, there is a significant change from one plan to the next, and in other respects, very little. The areas and aspects of change or no change are not consistent across these examples and seem to be primarily the results of reaction to a change in external circumstances; whether they are due to any development in planning perceptions and techniques is more doubtful.

77. The trade-off between rigidity and flexibility has been debated frequently and must be faced in this context. It has become clear over time that both these words have become value-laden, and it may be helpful in the analysis to use the less loaded terms "commitment and consistency", on the one hand, and "responsiveness and adaptability", on the other. Clearly, no one would emphasize commitment over responsiveness: the United Nations exists in a world characterized by uncertainty and change, often unpredictable change. Such changing situations and needs must be reflected in programmes or, perhaps more appropriately, in subprogrammes and programme elements. The decisions of the intergovernmental bodies on changes in policy are also to be reflected in changes in priorities and programme objectives.

78. On the other hand, a programme that lays down no reasonably long-term guidelines and constraints is not really a programme at all. At the highest level of generality, therefore - the major programme and usually the programme - considerable commitment and consistency should be expected; the lower the level of the unit of analysis, the more responsiveness and adaptability should be emphasized, since the time-scale involved becomes shorter and the instruments of control more subtle and selective. Thus, one of the purposes of a medium-term plan is to ensure the continuity, over time, of programmes, and in logic between programmes, subprogrammes and programme elements, so that when change is appropriate at the detailed level, there is a framework of consistency in which this can occur.

The scope of medium-term programme planning

79. The question of the scope of the activities to be analysed in the medium-term plan has never been directly addressed in the deliberations of intergovernmental bodies or in the resolutions concerning medium-term programming. The first plan, covering the period 1974-1977, encompassed only economic, social and human rights activities, but the comments made by the representatives of the Secretary-General on this plan at the fourteenth session of CPC indicated clearly that the intention was subsequently to cover all substantive activities, and that was done in the second plan and thereafter. 22/

80. In the present circumstances, the plan does not analyse programme support activities, administrative activities or conference service activities. The financial data (A/33/6 (Part 3)) 23/ present the costs of these activities separately and no longer attempt - if it was ever attempted in a thorough manner - to distribute them by programme. The functions of the administrative and support services are described and analysed in the biennial budget only; the specific characteristics of the work of these services during the period under consideration are indicated if necessary. The fact that the medium-term plan leaves aside support activities has given rise to no strong criticism and seems to be considered satisfactory.

81. The experience of four planning exercises has demonstrated that there is considerable variance in the degree to which different areas of activity lend themselves to medium-term planning, as it is understood so far. At one end of the spectrum are the economic and social activities, which seem well suited to this type of approach. Next, it may well be that in those spheres of activity where the requests for the services of the Organization are unpredictable, the efforts to improve the permanent infrastructure for the delivery of those services can and should be planned. Some major political programmes conducted in the pursuance of the most important purposes and principles of the Organization, as laid down in Article I of the Charter, would constitute the opposite end of the spectrum, since they lend themselves to planning only to a limited extent, if at all.

82. All this may mean that different approaches to planning may be called for, depending on the nature of the activity. Therefore, the question arises as to whether the further refinement of the planning process should concentrate on those areas that lend themselves most easily to it or whether the present comprehensive approach to medium-term planning covering all programmes should be continued.

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22/ See Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirtieth Session, Supplement No. 6A (A/10006/Add.1), paras. 42-44.

23/ To be issued as Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 6 (A/33/6/Rev.1).

The programmatic structure of the medium-term plan

The definition of programme units

83. By identifying in the activities of the system a four-level hierarchy of programme units <sup>24/</sup> and proposing a definition for each unit, the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions undoubtedly enabled substantial progress to be made in the methodology of programming in international organizations. However, the definition proposed for the level 2 unit (the programme) is merely a tautological expression of the hierarchical relation between levels: "a grouping of related subprogrammes directed at the attainment of one or more objectives that contribute to the broader objectives of the major programme at level 1". The definition continues by giving examples drawn from the programme documents of various agencies. There are a few programmes that do not fit this description, because the subprogrammes are not intrinsically related and indeed have only the most tenuous thematic links.

84. The United Nations medium-term plan for the period 1978-1981 contains a definition proposed by the Secretariat that is consistent with the hierarchical arrangement identified by the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions - namely, that "a programme consists of the activities in a sector under the responsibility of an office head or division director". <sup>25/</sup> This definition adds precision by introducing the concept of responsible organizational units. This precision, however, is achieved at the cost of tying the programme structure to the administrative structure. In a structure as complex as the United Nations, programming across the administrative structure, or at least the feasibility of it, is essential. This difference between managerial and programme perspectives has already been referred to briefly.

85. The clearest definitions of programme level are to be found at both ends of the hierarchy - the major programme, which is usually defined with respect to an area (industry, natural resources, statistics) and the programme element, which is the smallest programme unit. <sup>26/</sup> Between the two, the programme is more often than not identified with the organizational unit responsible for carrying it out, <sup>27/</sup> and that organizational unit is also identified in the programme budget, which at least has the advantage of linking the plan to the budget.

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<sup>24/</sup> See E/1978/43/Add.2, paras. 30-34. The four levels are major programme, programme, subprogramme, programme element.

<sup>25/</sup> Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Supplement No. 6A (A/31/6/Add.1), para. 113.

<sup>26/</sup> In connexion with the introduction of programme implementation schedules at the programme-element level, efforts are being made to achieve greater definitional precision.

<sup>27/</sup> Exceptions exist, for example in the regional commissions, in which a division may be responsible for several programmes when the volume of resources allocated to a regional programme is too small to permit the establishment of a separate organizational unit. Such exceptions are not numerous.

86. As CPC remarks in the report on the work of its eighteenth session, the level 3 unit (the subprogramme) is also the principal unit of analysis in the plan. 28/ It is therefore the unit that most requires specific and precise definition. Efforts have in fact been made to establish a clearer definition of their relation to objectives. However, the precision gained is apparent rather than firmly based because the concept of objectives is still open to considerable question and debate. Lack of clarity in regard to the definition of objectives gives programme managers insufficient direction in defining the scope and content of their subprogrammes. The number of subprogrammes is inversely related to their scope. If the subprogrammes were placed in the straight-jacket of absolute homogeneity and strictly time-limited objectives, their scope would be narrow and their numbers would increase, placing them at the same level as programme elements. On the other hand, arbitrarily reducing the number of subprogrammes for the sake of reduction would broaden their scope and make them heterogeneous, resulting in vague, multifaceted objectives whose realization would be in the distant future. This would render the programme level in the hierarchy meaningless because it would then in fact be covered by the broader subprogrammes. It is admittedly not easy to locate the proper balance between these two possible extremes. This is illustrated in annex IV of the present report, where an experimental reformulation of three programmes incorporating the time-limited objectives is presented.

87. The instructions for the formulation of medium-term plans given to programme managers were aimed at gradually establishing a definition of subprogrammes corresponding to single objectives at a relatively high level of generality. Such a definition does not exclude an identification of subprogrammes with sections, if in fact every section in a division works mainly to attain the objective that defines the subprogramme; but at this subprogramme level there seems to be no need for organizational structure to be perfectly adapted to the programme structure. On the contrary, perfect correspondence between structure and objective could reflect reluctance on the part of the programme managers to engage in programme analysis using medium-term objectives as the main criterion. The identification of one section with one subprogramme then becomes the easy way out.

#### The size of programme units

88. A brief analysis of the structure of the 1980-1983 plan confirms the heterogeneous nature of programme units, at least with respect to size. Leaving aside the "major programmes" unique to the regional commissions, and the special analyses, the most recent plan has the following structure:

#### Number of programme units in the 1980-1983 plan

<u>Sectors</u>	Major pro- grammes (MP) (level 1)	Pro- grammes (P)	Average number of <u>P</u> <u>MP</u>	Subpro- grammes (SP) (level 3)	Average number of <u>SP</u> <u>P</u>
Political, legal, humanitarian and information	9	17	2	57	3.4
Economic and social	15	90	6	298	3.3
<u>Total</u>	24	107	4.5	355	3.3

The large number of major programmes reflects the diversity of the sectors and problems with which the United Nations deals.

89. The Joint Inspection Unit, in its report on programming and evaluation in the United Nations, states that "it is reasonably correct to say that ... the subprogramme (level 3) corresponds more often than not to the section (a unit headed by an official at the D-1 or P-5 level)". <sup>29/</sup> That judgement is not fully supported by the facts: when comparing, in a sample of nine division programmes, the list of subprogrammes with the institutional breakdown of divisions into sections, it was found that in two cases sections and subprogrammes are practically identical; in two other cases the correspondence is only partial; and in the five remaining cases the breakdowns differ so widely that no relation can be established.

90. The average number of programmes per major programme shows significant variation. Considering all sectors, four major programmes have only a single programme, whereas the major programme on international trade has 15. The minimum number of subprogrammes in one major programme is three; the maximum, 42. The average number of subprogrammes per programme is 3.3 - ranging from a low of one to a high of 12. If an optimum programme unit were to be sought, the simplest indicator would be the number of professionals required to do the work. This assumes, however, that different programmes have identical staffing requirements and ignores the fact that there is no one-to-one relation between staff resources and programme importance. The medium-term plan for the period 1980-1983 supplies that indicator at the programme level. The 90 economic and social programmes employ about 1,730 professionals, <sup>30/</sup> an average of 19 per programme. Here again the average conceals a wide disparity in size. The smallest programmes employ one or two professionals, the largest 135. Thirty-nine programmes employ fewer than 10 professionals, 18 programmes fewer than 5, and only 10 programmes employ over 50 professionals. This has implications for the planning procedure, in that a model may be called for that is capable of adaptation to many different degrees of scope and staffing styles.

91. However, it might be pointed out that in general, variations from the standard should not exceed certain limits. At the lower limit, it could be argued that certain minimum resources are required before projects can be launched with any credibility and that activities carried out with resources below such a limit may be highly inefficient. Exceeding the upper limit, on the other hand, might indicate that too broad a scope has been given to programmes by programme managers in their interpretation of the definition of the hierarchy of levels in the plan. Generally speaking, establishing such limits, which is admittedly difficult, might provide a tool for signalling the necessity for closer examination.

#### Presentation of the plan by programmes

92. When the system of planning and programme budgeting was introduced, the directives received from the General Assembly following the recommendation of CPC and the Economic and Social Council required that the plan be "presented by

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<sup>29/</sup> E/1978/41, chap. II, para. 1 (b).

<sup>30/</sup> Financed by the regular budget and by extrabudgetary funds.

programme rather than by organizational unit so as to give a clear and integrated picture of each programme". 31/ This position has been repeatedly stressed by the Economic and Social Council and the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination.

93. In the medium-term plan for the period 1976-1979, the Secretary-General responded to these directives as follows:

"... most programmes in the economic and social fields are conducted by several organizations or organizational units that are relatively independent of each other. These United Nations programmes, then, are rather loosely bound systems since the ties uniting the diverse programmes within any one organization, such as a regional commission, are in general stronger than those uniting the same programme activities in different organizations."

"This lack of correspondence between organization and programmes should not be regarded as a 'fault' to be corrected, however, since the case for decentralized planning by region is at least as strong as that for planning by programme. But the intrinsic problem of the lack of any clear-cut responsibility for the programme as a whole remains in many cases and, if programme planning is to become truly operational in the United Nations, then something more than co-ordination may be needed". 32/

94. The organization of the narratives remained broadly the same in the two subsequent plans. The situation is even more serious in the 1980-1983 plan. The establishment of the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development led to the separate presentation, within a single major programme, of Secretariat activities relating to research and activities relating to technical co-operation which, in many cases, had been presented in an integrated manner in the preceding plans. 33/

95. As the Secretary-General remarked in the introduction to the 1976-1979 plan, the problem is not just a technical one: it has an organizational dimension because the regional commissions, which are intergovernmental organs, have a very large degree of autonomy in programme matters. In so far as the objectives and strategies of the commissions and those of the secretariats of the United Nations organizations and specialized agencies are not too far apart, it would be technically possible to consolidate drafts for the plan at the central programming level. The advantages and drawbacks of consolidation will be discussed in section V of the present report.

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31/ General Assembly resolution 3199 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973, para. 5.

32/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirtieth Session, Supplement No. 6A (A/10006/Add.1), paras. 248-249.

33/ A/33/6 (Part 2), paras. 8 and 9. To be issued as Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 6 (A/33/6/Rev.1).

The concept of an intersectoral programme

96. The possibility of conceiving, establishing and carrying out intersectoral programmes creates problems similar to those associated with consolidation but apparently more complicated. In both cases, what is required is the integrated presentation of activities undertaken simultaneously by several organizational units. In the case described in the foregoing paragraphs, however, the activities are part of a single major programme (or sector). In the case of intersectoral programmes, the activities involve disciplines associated with different major programmes. One example of an intersectoral programme is rural development, which in the case of the United Nations itself, could in theory involve seven major programmes at least: (1) Development policy; (2) Environment; (3) Food and agriculture; (4) Human settlements; (5) Industrial development; (6) Public administration; and (7) Social development and humanitarian affairs.

97. While many activities in a number of major United Nations programmes call for the collaboration of other sectors when necessary, the existence of these input flows is described under the heading "Co-ordination" and is not the subject of separate analyses. However, it has sometimes been found necessary to devote a special heading to intersectoral programmes in the programme documents and to give them a specific organizational existence by, for example, appointing a managing unit and allocating a given volume of resources to the programme (establishment of a team by redeploying staff from several existing units). This allocation of resources has rarely, and never in the United Nations, been translated into budgetary terms.

98. The question of intersectoral programmes and organizational arrangements for their implementation arose in UNESCO in 1970. A report of the Joint Inspection Unit was devoted to that problem and concluded that the programmes could, if necessary, be the subject of specific analyses and could give rise to the establishment of temporary horizontal organizational structures, but that it would be dangerous to superimpose permanent programme structures or horizontal organizational structures on the existing vertical structures. The Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its eighteenth session expressed a similar view concerning rural development. 34/

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34/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/33/38), para. 669.

## V. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO PLANNING

99. At its eighteenth session the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination took the decision to study the planning process in the United Nations in the context of a discussion of the entire process of planning, programme budgeting and evaluation. <sup>35/</sup> In this discussion, the Committee identified the medium-term plan as the core element of this process. <sup>36/</sup> It has therefore been given first priority in review and analysis. Much of the material in the previous sections of the present report suggests that the planners, in both intergovernmental and secretariat bodies, are faced with problems that may well require different solutions from those tried so far. The approaches currently in use may well have been chosen in part because they produce fewer problems of implementation than others, rather than because they solved more fundamental problems than did the alternative approaches. When different options are considered, both the advantages and disadvantages must be weighed; and both pros and cons can either be manifest or latent. This section is therefore given over primarily to a survey of alternative conceptual and organizational approaches to what seem to be some key planning problems in the United Nations.

### The nature and scope of the plan

#### The nature of the medium-term plan

##### The inductive or deductive approach to planning

100. Conceptually, medium-term planning can be approached from two different perspectives: inductively, by building on existing programmes and activities; or deductively, by deriving and deducing strategies from future goals. The first approach would formulate strategies and objectives for the future by extending past and present activities into the future. It tends to result in detailed programming in a context of apparent high predictability since the future is assumed to be an extension of the past and, in this sense, the future work programme is predictable and planned. The second approach deduces programme strategies and activities from a given set of objectives. These objectives would be set by an analysis of projected future conditions and on the basis of legislative mandates. It tends to result in indicative planning rather than detailed programming.

101. In practice, however, no medium-term planning system conforms exactly to either of these two approaches, which in their pure form constitute opposite ends of a continuum. Each of the various planning systems contains elements of each approach, differing only in emphasis on one or the other orientation. When the question is considered in the framework of these two approaches, it can be

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<sup>35/</sup> Ibid., paras. 129-131.

<sup>36/</sup> Ibid., para. 7.



seen that many of the criticisms of past and current planning practice at the United Nations seem to be directed against problems arising from the existing emphasis on the inductive approach, that of extending the past into the future.

102. An important difference between the two approaches is that the deductive approach requires a direct linkage between objectives, strategies and programmes in a way that shows how the latter are derived from the former. As these objectives stem directly from the legislative mandates, this approach requires a more precise definition of objectives and clearer choices of strategies for their implementation. This would make the process of translating mandates into objectives more explicit. At the same time, since the plan is used as an indication of future orientations instead of for detailed programming, the relation between the medium-term plan and the budget would be a looser one, thus giving the Organization a greater potential for accommodating changes of policy and strategy.

103. A main characteristic of the extension approach is that it guarantees some clear line of continuity. If the United Nations is to deal with long-range as well as short-term problems, there should be a reasonable degree of consistency, even if not unmodified continuity, in its programmes. The extension of activities into the future, and the inevitable linkage between objectives of the past with those of the future, will help to ensure this consistency.

104. Another problem demonstrating the differences in the two approaches is how to enhance the creativity of programme managers in their approach to problem-solving. To constrain thinking about problems to the restricted limits of those activities that are currently being or have already been undertaken might well inhibit this creativity. As the medium-term plan should be a major tool for encouraging innovative but realistic thinking, the deductive approach is to be preferred on this score.

105. This deductive approach to planning, which emphasizes the longer-term policy-linking functions and facilitates co-ordination instead of concentrating on the details of short-term work programmes, might commend itself to the intergovernmental bodies. It might also produce a smaller document, because programme elements and corresponding details may be omitted. Experience has suggested that these are, in any case, difficult to predict accurately five or even three years ahead. Also if programme managers no longer were requested to describe detailed but perhaps rather unpredictable outputs, the pressure on them to describe objectives so vaguely (a source of criticism throughout the Organization) might be less.

106. Two other questions to be considered under the general topic of the nature of the plan are the relative merits of a rolling or fixed-horizon plan, and whether this should take the form of a comprehensive or staggered process.

#### A rolling or fixed-horizon plan

107. When medium-term planning was introduced into the United Nations, the system of a rolling plan was preferred, mainly to ensure its adaptation to changing

needs and demands and to synchronize it, on a four-year cycle, with the envisaged programme budget that was also being introduced, at that time, on a two-year cycle. Although the rolling format provides opportunities for change, these have not always been fully utilized.

108. One criticism of the present format is that there has been too much repetition and too little change in activities over the period. Lack of change is, it seems, often associated with planning methods that call for frequent reformulation: apparently it encourages a psychological conservatism in programme managers. Lack of change as such may be appropriate, but it may also indicate organizational inadequacy in responding to change. When the problems faced by the Organization do not change, continuity in the formulation of the plan is to be expected. However, if the problems are undergoing dynamic change, this should be reflected in the programme. The main requirement for improving the process of planning, whatever the technique used, is to show clearly what changes have occurred in the external environment or in the policy of the Organization. These should be reflected in legislative directives requiring corresponding changes in a United Nations programme or in a part of a programme. One of the criticisms of the most recent rolling plan, in contrast to its predecessors, is that it is very difficult to tell how much change of thinking it represents. This may be despite or because of its 1,200 typewritten pages.

109. Perhaps by focusing on the elements of change in the plan, its value as a policy-making instrument might be increased and its bulk reduced. In particular, attention could be focused on those programme units that are being initiated or changed. Conversely, when subprogrammes or programme elements are dropped, modified or replaced, while the objectives and strategies remain the same, would it not be sufficient to mention this in the periodic implementation report? Such methods for more efficient plan production could be developed, and this would remove some of the major objections to fixed-horizon planning and reduce the number of work-months to be invested in the plan.

110. There is no obvious reason why the process that has been selected at both the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNESCO should not be implemented if a fixed-horizon planning system were chosen, as it has been at those agencies. In this system, a document is issued at intervals and presents, as a periodic readjustment, only the significant changes in the ongoing plan. Such interim documents give a picture of the changes proposed and the reason for which they are proposed. This procedure has been clearly favoured by ACC. Its report on the medium-term plan (E/1978/43/Add.2), which is contained in annex III of the present report, states that medium-term plans should be on a fixed-horizon basis and periodically updated.

#### Comprehensive or staggered planning

111. Under a comprehensive plan, all the different activities of the system, however widely scattered geographically, administratively or functionally, are reviewed as a whole. Such an approach allows an analysis of the interrelation between various programmes. It reflects the assumption, often emphasized by CPC,

the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, that the relation between the various programmes is as important as the analysis of the content of the individual components. This not only permits the review of individual programmes but also makes possible a clear analysis of the implications of revisions for related programmes throughout the United Nations family. The decision to plan all United Nations programmes at the same time apparently was not initially based on such considerations, however. Rather, comprehensive planning emerged as a by-product of budgetary reforms, with the plan covering the same scope of activities as the programme budget. In addition, a comprehensive approach corresponded to the planning systems already introduced by other agencies in the system. This fact makes a comprehensive plan a potential instrument for the co-ordination of programmes.

112. By contrast, staggered planning is based on the assumption that each separate sector of the system should control its own planning process, lessening the emphasis on the interrelation between the sectors. There is, however, an increasing realization that most development problems are inherently intersectoral and cross-disciplinary, which raises doubts about the appropriateness of staggered planning. Also, the emphasis placed by the central intergovernmental organs on over-all priority-setting and the use of the planning process for this purpose weakens the case for staggered planning, which by definition does not lend itself to comparative analysis.

113. The arguments for staggered planning are simply and briefly stated. Essentially, a staggered plan allows medium-term plans to stem directly from such action-oriented "events" as world conferences. Some kind of stock-taking summary document would be necessary at regular but not frequent intervals, in order to ensure the overt linkage of the plan and the budget. The question of schedule discrepancies between events is dealt with below. It is sufficient to note here that any plan approach must include techniques for responding appropriately to events that occur at irregular or "inconvenient" moments in the planning cycle.

#### The scope of the medium-term plan

114. The central problem as regards the scope of the medium-term plan is whether all fields of activity should be included, whether or not they lend themselves easily to planning. The conceptual spectrum from the obviously plannable to the apparently unplannable has already been mentioned. The following paragraphs look more closely at the nature of this continuum, so that the appropriate cut-off point can be more accurately identified.

115. The easiest and the most radical solution would be to choose only those activities that quite clearly come before the cut-off point: this would mean limiting the analyses of major programmes in terms of general objectives. Alternatively, it could be argued that the planning process should be applied as widely as possible, because of its utility in priority-setting within broad programme areas and in co-ordinating interrelated activities, as already mentioned.

116. Special problems arise with programmes and subprogrammes described variously as "permanent", "continuing" or "ongoing". It has been asserted that medium-term planning can contribute little to these programmes, because the strategy for producing the outputs has been evolved gradually and does not change substantially over time. Examples of such programmes are the periodic preparation and publication of economic and social data, the substantive support of negotiations in the economic field and reviews of the implementation of international agreements or instruments. However, the fact that an activity is permanent does not mean that it cannot be planned, although the term "planning" might have a different connotation, nor that its objectives can never change, although their rate of change is likely to be slower than for other programmes. Perhaps the appropriate methodology of planning for this category of activities might be to emphasize a review of objectives, scheduling and implementation. Such an approach might help to create a typology of planning methodologies with specific variants to cope with particular types of activity. The question of whether continuing, permanent activities and those of a long-term finite nature differ in degree only and not in kind is, from the planning perspective, important with regard to the use of time-limited objectives, which are discussed below. If it is agreed that continuing activities have to be subjected in some way to a rigorous internal planning, programming and evaluation process, the operation becomes one of identifying the proper methodology in this context. Programmes that are continuing should not be exempted from a review procedure parallel to that to which those activities whose objectives are time-limited are subjected.

The period to be covered by the plan

117. The duration of the plan envisaged by the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies was six years. The decision of the General Assembly to opt for a four-year period was based on the belief that the nature of United Nations activities, combined with the Secretariat's lack of experience with planning, would tend to make the later parts of the plan too remote and sketchy. In 1973, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions suggested that the period might be extended to six years once the Secretariat had acquired the necessary experience and expertise. On several subsequent occasions, it has been argued that it is to all intents and purposes impossible to forecast and programme United Nations activities beyond a horizon of four years, and the desirability of retaining a four-year time-frame has been repeated several times in CPC. The psychological factor is important: if it is not believed that the content of a forecast is very reliable, it will not be treated seriously, acted upon with any great conviction or stimulate involvement. On the other hand, some bodies have to plan further ahead than four years or even six years, and many have found the careful use of the analysis of possible alternative future scenarios valuable.

118. Clearly a detailed list of activities (the list of programme elements) can hardly be the subject of valid medium-term planning, whether that term is four or six years. Indeed, there are programme elements the details of which are finally established only during the current year. It may be that a clear-cut distinction between medium-term planning and short-term programming has been slow to emerge

in the United Nations in that the relatively short period chosen for the medium-term plan may have placed a restrictive horizon on the vision of programme managers. There has therefore been a temptation to formulate the medium-term plan narratives so vaguely that they could serve as the basis for any subsequent programme-budget requests.

119. There are two final points to be borne in mind in considering what the planning time-frame should be. First, the life-term of strategies. Although this concept has not been applied previously, and in such cases as permanent activities has no relevance, it should be taken into account in that many strategies come to fruition only after a decade, or even longer, and do not even begin to show measurable results for five years or more. On the whole, experience with planning, especially in the social sector, has tended to show that longer planning cycles discriminate less against slower maturing programmes through lessening the pressure to quantify the unquantifiable. Secondly, there is the time-frame chosen by other organizations within the system which draw up medium-term plans. These organizations have opted for six-year cycles, and ACC has stated that it favours the general acceptance of a six-year plan. Because of the longer lead-time possible in the preparation stage, the various requirements of co-ordination, harmonization and consultation within and between agencies are probably easier to fulfil. On the other hand, it can be argued that what is ideal for full preparation and the involvement of all may be incompatible with what is ideal for a plan capable of responding to changes and whose time-frame is short enough to appear credible in its forecasts.

#### Other factors affecting the nature of the planning methodology chosen

120. There are four other components of planning that are closely related to each other and that have been mentioned earlier in the report: (i) evaluation, (ii) time-limited objectives, (iii) achievement indicators and (iv) the termination of programmes.

#### Evaluation

121. Evaluation has been covered in considerable detail above and is also the subject of a separate report entitled "Programme evaluation for the period 1976-1978: transnational corporations". 37/ Here it is sufficient to re-emphasize the crucial aspects:

(a) There is general agreement that evaluation is a fundamental component in any planning process;

(b) Evaluation entails both description and explanation of what has happened, and how and why this differs from the intended outcome, if that is the case;

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37/ To be issued.

(c) The planning process must be organized so as to allow such findings to be fed in systematically at the start of the next round of the planning cycle;

(d) The points above have implications for both the planning period chosen and the institutional framework created to implement this.

#### Time-limited objectives

122. Time-limited objectives have been advocated strongly in recent years in documents on planning in various contexts, including the 1978 Joint Inspection Unit report (E/1978/41 and Corr.1 and 2), as potentially having the following advantages:

(a) The formulation of objectives in clear-cut, decisive terms would facilitate both monitoring of output and evaluation of impact;

(b) Those activities that may be regarded as complete, obsolete or of marginal usefulness would stand out more clearly;

(c) Programme managers would be encouraged to think innovatively, which would help to prevent the continuation of programmes or subprogrammes over time with little change or apparent consideration of change, a phenomenon criticized above.

123. However, the following difficulties must also be considered:

(a) Time-limited objectives are not applicable to all activities. Thus if the use of time-limited objectives is taken as a prerequisite for any "good" planning rather than as a helpful tool, it could lead to either the classification of continuing activities as "unplannable" or to de-emphasizing finite activities with long lead and delivery times, especially in the social sphere;

(b) It has also been argued that the use of time-limited objectives might well increase the number of subprogrammes simply by making them more specific and thereby narrowing their focus. The use of two levels of objectives, first a generalized statement of over-all purpose and then a series of very specific statements, which can easily be monitored, might help to contain this proliferation of subprogrammes.

124. There is no doubt that time-limited objectives appropriately used are very valuable in tightening up the logic and monitoring of planning processes and implementation. An examination of their feasibility is being pursued in the further development of planning in the United Nations.

#### Achievement indicators

125. An important characteristic of achievement indicators is that they are formulated in advance and thus provide a pre-set yardstick for the realization of objectives. They thereby encourage a more specific formulation of these objectives. In the evaluation of performance in organizations, it has been found that the more

quantity-specific the context, the easier it is to apply achievement indicators. They are, however, open to criticism in that they can be a source of pressure to "invent" superficial measures. The factors that are easily measurable are not necessarily the most important ones. However, there is no doubt that pre-identified achievement indicators can be of great value if used appropriately. The main problem to be solved is to identify where and where not achievement indicators can be used. In short, the question is not whether they should be used, but when and how.

#### Termination of programmes

126. One of the advantages derived from the employment of evaluation in general and the use of time-limited objectives and achievement indicators, is that they encourage the clearer identification of those programmes, subprogrammes or programme elements that have reached the end of their useful life. There has been considerable criticism that this has not been attempted seriously or regularly enough, and the main argument for the use of these rigorous tools arises from this. The absence of time-limited objectives or built-in achievement indicators does not, however, by itself constitute evidence of obsolescence or marginal usefulness - for instance, where the ultimate objectives of a programme are the servicing of negotiation processes, the ultimate outcome of which cannot be predicted.

127. The second problem in this area is whether the programmes or subprogrammes that are to be phased out should be included in the medium-term plan or not. On the one hand, the plan is intended to trace the path of and rationale for change throughout the Organization; on the other hand, it is concerned with what the Organization will do, not with what it will not do. The programme performance reports would be the appropriate place to set out the programme details and the reasons for including those particular programme units in this category.

#### The organizational framework for the implementation of the plan

128. Whatever form of plan is decided upon, its effect on the workings of the United Nations will be influenced greatly by the machinery established for its formulation and implementation. The problems to be solved can be broken down into three main categories.

#### The consolidation of functionally and regionally decentralized activities

129. Programmes are sometimes executed by more than one organizational unit. The General Assembly's recommendation in this situation is that the programme narratives submitted by the units concerned be "consolidated", but this is not yet the normal practice, for three reasons. First, decentralized intergovernmental bodies tend to value their political and organizational identity and therefore might perceive an over-all programme-oriented analysis of activities as potentially compromising this identity. Secondly, because of the time required for drafts to go from body to body, and the number of final approvals that would have to be obtained, the process would become quite lengthy and would certainly extend well

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beyond the capacity of any time-frames so far allowed for the preparation of narratives. Thirdly, the scheduling of meetings of the functionally and regionally decentralized bodies is adapted to the needs of these bodies rather than to those of the planning process.

130. An additional aspect is the irregular cycle of major conferences and meetings. There are several problems raised by the fact that many major United Nations events and activities do not follow a similar cycle. For example, there are fields in which world conferences are held either regularly or from time to time. If the conference cycle and the planning cycle are different, a special mechanism is required either to build the conclusion of the conference into the plan or to restructure the plan. The outputs of both conference and evaluation procedures might trigger the need for programme or major programme updating. The overhauling of plans, in fact, has been adduced as a major argument for both a rolling-plan approach and a staggered-plan approach. In general, the choice of planning approach adopted should encourage the simultaneous occurrence of "developments" in the same area - for instance, a world conference on and an evaluation of the same programme or subprogramme. The evaluation could feed into the conference and the conference into the plan. This kind of co-ordination and interrelation probably requires at least a background comprehensive plan.

131. The advantages of consolidation can be stated as follows: consolidated programmes would be easier to review than a series of separate revisions, and presumably would be more concise. At a more general level, consolidation of programmes would be part of the rationalization and co-ordination of activities within the United Nations. There are intrinsic difficulties, however, in that when objectives are common to a number of units, responsibility for achieving them appears fragmented; conversely, when objectives are not clearly common to several units, it is difficult to reduce the objectives to a generally accepted common denominator. This would make the use of time-limited objectives, attainment indicators and the whole evaluation process all the more difficult. Certain ameliorative measures might be possible, such as statements that certain objectives were the responsibility of some units only; or altered time-frames for preparation; or administrative procedures to intensify the level and speed of interaction between the bodies of the system. But these would not remove the difficulties entirely. These difficulties are, in fact, a function of the level of analysis. They are considerable at the highest level of programme aggregation (programmes and possibly subprogrammes) and insignificant at the lower levels (programme elements and projects).

#### The relation between programme structures and administrative structure

132. The theoretically ideal objective in a comprehensively planned organization would be, presumably, perfect congruence between the administrative structure and the programme structure. When the two structures do not coincide, there is likely to be tension, and the resolution of this tension could be brought about by an administrative reorganization. Incongruence between programme and administrative structure is not unique to the United Nations but, despite the many debates and discussions that have been held on that difficulty in various committees and other organs, no final consensus has emerged. In so far as the



medium-term plan was introduced in connexion with the programme budget, and a programme was conceived as the total of the Organization's activities there was a built-in assumption that the programmatic features would fit the administrative structure, and that this was appropriate. That original definition was expedient, in so far as the institutional development of the Organization had followed the growth of its activities quite closely. But over time, programmes, structure and organizational allocation of resources changed at different speeds in different sectors, and the matching of the different elements to one another broke down with increasing speed. Thus the question of whether administrative or programme structure should take primacy can still be posed.

133. One particular problem within the general context of the relation of programme structure to administrative structure is that of appropriate programme size. As has been mentioned earlier, programme units at all levels vary greatly in size when measured by numbers of Professional staff involved. However, this does not mean that programmes should all be the same size, or that programme importance or significance correlate in any way with staffing numbers. Some of the most "important" programmes may be among those with smaller staffing levels. A review of trends in staffing levels over time would be an effective monitor of how resource allocation in practice reflected any priority-setting exercise that had been carried out.

#### The duration of the preparation and review cycle

134. As has been mentioned in paragraphs 44-46 above, for various reasons insufficient time was allowed to permit smooth and effective preparation for the formulation of past medium-term plans. It is essential that this question be settled since improvements in the quality of the planning instrument can hardly be achieved if the work has to be done in a hurry.

135. In so far as the economic and social areas are concerned, the first step should be the formulation of the planning format and the instructions by the Director-General for International Economic Co-operation, under the authority of the Secretary-General, setting out policies to guide the development of the planning process. Thereafter, ideally, three levels of intergovernmental organs should be involved in the formulation of the medium-term plan: the subsidiary organs with technical functions; decentralized policy-making organs; and central organs.

136. Annex II of this report presents, in summary form, the usual calendars of meetings of the principal or subsidiary decentralized bodies and of the functional committees of the Economic and Social Council which discuss the programmes of the Organization. A preparation process that would ensure the effective participation of all these levels could be long and elaborate and might require as much as three years. A schematic representation of such a cycle, assuming that changes in the usual calendars of meetings are reduced to a minimum, is shown in annex II, along with an alternative version in which as much time as possible has been saved through a number of calendar changes and other short-cuts, in an attempt to reduce the preparation period to two years.

137. There are arguments for both the longer and shorter preparation cycle, as there are for the period to be covered by the plan. The arguments for the different preparation cycles can be summarized as follows:

- (a) A shorter cycle:
  - (i) Reduces the psychological bias against commitments over long time-frames (a total of almost nine years if a six-year planning period is adopted) in which considerable change is sure to take place;
  - (ii) Adds to the continuity of the planning process and hence the degree of involvement;
  - (iii) Allows for more accurate (because later) assessment of required changes and the appropriate reaction to changes in the external environment;
- (b) A longer preparation cycle:
  - (i) Allows for the participation of all appropriate bodies, with plenty of opportunity for full collaboration, so that the plan would come to seem less a product of the central organs only;
  - (ii) Does not demand a possibly quite drastic rescheduling of many meetings and events within the Organization.

The longer preparation period would make the adoption of a rolling plan reformulated every two years more difficult. That is, it would affect the nature of any rolling plan adopted much more than that of a fixed-horizon plan.

138. Section V has set out the arguments for and against various choices in the development of a new approach to medium-term planning in the United Nations. A demonstration, in matrix form, of the way in which certain choices will affect other choices (that is, if one type of approach is chosen at one point, it might make another feature much more difficult to incorporate elsewhere), is presented below with an explanatory commentary.

#### Summary

139. The present report covers a wide range of theoretical and organizational issues and, most importantly, the interaction between the two. It is not an easy presentation to summarize. The document is intended primarily to serve as a basis for discussion in CPC and other intergovernmental bodies. The results of these deliberations will be the main guide to the Secretariat in preparing future medium-term plans - hence the analysis of the compatibility (or incompatibility) of various approaches and methods and suggestions on the relative importance of various functions of the plan. While certain recommendations may be inferred from this analysis, the formulation of specific conclusions and guidance has been left to the competent intergovernmental bodies.

140. The summary is presented in the form of a matrix and commentary in order to highlight the most important aspects of the planning process. It is hoped that this matrix will also serve as a bench-mark, for the Secretariat as well as for the intergovernmental bodies, against which future progress can be measured. In particular, it may show clearly what the next series of problems to be solved will be, whatever method of planning is finally chosen by the policy-making bodies.

141. The matrix is made up of (a) eight main planning possibilities, each of which is one alternative from a mutually exclusive pair; and (b) 15 functions and characteristics of planning methods in general; these, while not mutually exclusive, may be more easily achieved through one approach to planning than another. The alternatives are presented along the top row and are therefore to be read down each column. They are plotted, first, against the functions to demonstrate compatibility or relative incompatibility, and these plots occupy the first 15 rows of the matrix. Finally, on the bottom eight rows (rows 16-23) the alternatives are plotted against each other. This indicates where relative incompatibility requires organizational insight and compromise in order to obtain most of what is desired; and complete incompatibility, where a clear-cut choice has to be made and one alternative traded-off against another without compromise.

142. All of the alternatives and functions are dealt with at some length in the text of the present report, mostly in section V, but a few earlier. The numbers in brackets refer to the paragraphs in the text where these items are considered. A few are not included in the matrix either because they do not lend themselves to this style of presentation or because their inclusion is unnecessary.

143. Thus, the distinction between inductive and deductive approaches to planning has not been mentioned because the analysis in the text at the beginning of section V led to the conclusion that this is not a real dichotomy at any but the theoretical level. In practice, some combination of the two would be necessary, and an outline of the relative merits of the two "alternatives" was given.

144. Also, the scope of the plan has been omitted from the matrix because it was found to have little impact on the other dimensions. That is not to say that it is unimportant; but rather that the factors that will be decisive in choosing the scope are not those mentioned in the matrix - the choice will be made on other grounds.

145. Finally, the relation between the programmatic structure and the administrative structure is also omitted from the matrix because it also is essentially controlled by other factors and raises questions of too general and organizational a nature to be dealt with in a summary.

<u>Alternative approaches</u>		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	
		Rolling plan	Fixed-horizon plan	4-year plan period	6-year plan period	2-year prep/review	3-year prep/review	Comprehensive plan	Staggered plan	
<u>Functions and characteristics</u> (rows 1-15)										
<u>Alternatives</u> (rows 16-27)										
Paragraphs in text										
1.	Sensitivity to external changes	33(a), 43, 77-78	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)	(-)	+
2.	Sensitivity to organizational changes	47, 49-50, 77	+	+	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)
3.	A tool for organizational policy formulation	7-10, 15-17, 22-23, 26, 33(c)(d)(e)(f)(h)(i), 46-47, 55	+	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	(-)
4.	A tool for system-wide co-ordination	22-26, 33(j), 39-41, 49-50, 52, 65-73, 96-98	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	-
5.	Involvement of intergovernmental organs in policy formulation	19-21, 33(d), 37-47, 66	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	+
6.	Consolidation of programmes	96-98, 129-131	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	(-)
7.	Clear distinction between short-term (budget) and medium-term (planning)	7-14, 21, 55-57, 72, 85	(-)	+	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	(-)
8.	Evaluation	26, 33(i), 51(e), 55(d), 62-64, 74, 120-121	+	+	(-)	+	+	+	+	+
9.	Clear demonstration of changes in plan	48-49, 100-106, 108-110, 116	(-)	(-)	(-)	+	+	+	(-)	-
10.	Facilitates the transition to new objectives	26, 116, 119, 126-127	-	(-)	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	(-)
11.	Clear specification of objectives	33(d), 87, 102	(-)	(-)	+	+	(-)	+	(-)	(-)
12.	Use of achievement indicators	125	+	+	(-)	+	(-)	(-)	(-)	-
13.	Use of time-limited objectives	4, 27, 124	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	+	(-)	-
14.	Innovation in devising strategies	74, 77-78, 104	(-)	(-)	(-)	+	(-)	+	+	(-)
15.	Feasibility of strategies	60, 76, 77-78, 103	(-)	(-)	+	+	(-)	+	(-)	+
16.	Staggered plan	112-113	-	(-)	(-)	+	(-)	+	o	
17.	Comprehensive plan	111	(-)	+	-	(-)	(-)	+		
18.	3-year preparation and review period	134-138, annex II	+	+	o	+	o			
19.	2-year preparation and review period	134-138, annex II	+	(-)	+	-				
20.	6-year plan period	8, 11, 13, 117-119	(-)	+	o					
21.	4-year plan period	12-14, 54, 117-119	+	(-)						
22.	Fixed-horizon plan	107-110	o							
23.	Rolling plan	107-110								

(Commentary on following page)

Commentary

Abstract symbols have been chosen deliberately, in order to avoid the apparent but false rigour which the use of numbers suggests. If the numbers 1, 2 and 3, for example, were substituted for + (-) and -, it would give the impression that the degree of difficulty created by different alternatives is known or is calculable, and at present this is not the case. However, such a matrix might serve as a tool for developing specific questions of this kind as the refinement and development of planning continues. Secondly, the values inserted in each square are themselves the subjective estimates of the compilers of the report, and no infallibility or special status is claimed for them. They are suggested as aids for discussion and particularly for focusing the discussion on specifics. The symbols are intended to convey the following approximate assessments:

- ∗ = the two items whose column and row coincide at that box are compatible or easily made so
- (-) = the two items are not compatible, but probably can be made so without too much difficulty;
- .. = the two items can be made compatible only with much effort and readjustment;
- o = the two items are incompatible and mutually exclusive.

Thus the matrix can be used in two ways:

(a) To examine the specific interaction of two dimensions of the question and discuss the problems that are raised, including the degree of difficulty of the solutions considered appropriate;

(b) If the values are approximately agreed, the degree of "problem-proneness" of each dimension can be estimated roughly by adding up the number of (-) and .. symbols on each column (for the alternatives) or row (for the characteristics and functions).

An over-all first impression will show what has already emerged fairly clearly in the text - namely, that the range of choice reaches from a four-year period and a two-year preparation time rolling plan to a six-year period and a three-year preparation time fixed-horizon plan. Comprehensive and staggered planning, though mutually exclusive, would go with either. The difficulties each creates vary. The choice between them will presumably be made according to which of the characteristics and functions are given highest priority. The fact that 'evaluation' and "planning" are conceptually dependent upon each other and therefore are meaningful primarily with reference to the other, has been pointed out in the report. The matrix indicates that with some limitations under one or two possible solutions, there should be no serious practical problems in combining these two processes within the Organization.