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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on medium-term planning in the United Nations

Comments by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on medium-term planning in the United Nations (JIU/REP/79/5).

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\* A/34/150.

## INTRODUCTION

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on medium-term planning in the United Nations (A/34/84), prepared by Inspector Maurice Bertrand, is the latest in a sizable list of reports on the same or related subjects which started to appear as early as 1969. This alone indicates the continuing interest of the Joint Inspection Unit as a body and of Inspector Bertrand in particular in the subject-matter and gives a measure of the eminent contribution thus brought to the theory, methodology and practice of programme planning in the United Nations system. Over the years, by analysing the experience of the secretariats of the organizations of the system and the reactions of intergovernmental bodies, the Inspector's concept of medium-term planning has progressively evolved from an ambitious, all-encompassing and integrated construction containing a high degree of theorization into something more easily adjustable to the constraints and limitations of an international organization.

2. This latest report was prepared in response to a request by the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) at its eighteenth session. 1/ At that session, the Committee took a decision to make an in-depth study of the planning process on the basis of two reports, one by the Secretary-General (E/AC.51/97 and Add.1 and 2) and the other by the Joint Inspection Unit (A/34/84).

3. As indicated in a foot-note to paragraph 8 of the report of CPC on the work of its nineteenth session, 2/ the report of the Joint Inspection Unit was submitted to CPC before the Secretary-General could make his comments available in the form provided for under the statute of the Joint Inspection Unit. Nevertheless, in the course of the discussions in CPC, a number of preliminary oral comments on the report were made by the Secretariat. They are reflected, at least in part, in the above-mentioned CPC report.

4. As a result of its debate on the planning process, CPC reached conclusions and formulated recommendations which in certain instances coincided with and in others differed from recommendations formulated by the Inspector. On recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit which were clearly supported or clearly rejected by CPC, the Secretary-General feels that further comments are not needed. His comments will therefore focus on the Unit's recommendations on which CPC reached no definite conclusion at its nineteenth session and which remain open for further debate.

### I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

5. As stated in his report on the planning process submitted to CPC at its nineteenth session (E/AC.51/97), the Secretary-General is aware of the weaknesses of the current planning processes and of the criticisms voiced, and understands that the plan documents produced so far have not fulfilled the high expectations

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1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-third Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/33/38), para. 3.

2/ A/34/38 (Part I).

of the initiators of the programme planning system. He feels, however, that the causes of these problems are in large part attributable to the difficulties inherent in the task of programming United Nations activities under far-reaching mandates and within political and financial constraints.

6. Planning the programmes of intergovernmental administrations is a pioneering job attempted so far in very few instances and with varying results where it has been attempted. The fact that the United Nations is still grappling with medium-term planning, even with limited success, while other attempts either have been shelved or have significantly curtailed their initial ambitions, might be considered as deserving some tribute. The Secretary-General does not share the opinion of the Inspector on the depth and gravity of a "planning crisis" in the United Nations. However, the Secretary-General agrees entirely with the report of the Joint Inspection Unit when it states that, to date, the objectives in United Nations plans are imprecise and stresses the need "to bridge the gaps between the general and ambitious objectives set out in the resolutions and the very varied outputs deriving from the day-to-day activities of the secretariats" (A/34/84, para. 4).

7. The report states in paragraph 42, that the current method of planning is based on the translation by programme managers themselves of broad objectives, determined by resolutions of intergovernmental organs, into activities which they feel would be conducive to the attainment of these objectives. This, in the Inspector's view, should be replaced by a dialogue between Member States and the Secretariat on the definition of "time-limited target-objectives" (para. 43). From this paragraph, the Secretary-General understands that the dialogue would take place in the meetings of functional and technical committees and is intended to (a) bridge the gaps referred to in paragraph 4 and (b) do away with the imprecision and vagueness of programme objectives. By such procedure it is hoped that, with the help of substantive secretariats, Member States, through technicians representing them in technical committees, would be able to translate "resolutions often couched in ambitious terms" into "limited but reasonably effective action to be taken by international organizations" (para. 5).

8. In a table (see paras. 44 and 45), the report offers a parallel series of "general objectives" and "types of time-limited target-objectives". The general objectives, as explained in paragraph 42 (a), are those usually found in resolutions. Examples of time-limited target-objectives are also offered in paragraphs 50 to 54. The examples generally refer to the completion, on a set date, of an activity by the Secretariat, such as: "training specialists", "formulating model national legislation", "publishing a series of studies" etc. Such objectives, however, can already be found in the best programme narratives in the United Nations medium-term plan.

9. In paragraph 55, the report states that it is possible and desirable for United Nations objectives to go beyond the mere description of the Secretariat's outputs to be made available to Governments of Member States. The Inspector recognizes, however, that the formulation of such an objective as "eradicating smallpox" or bringing about changes in unfavourable situations within countries or regions would not as a rule be feasible since "such objectives are mostly the

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responsibility of Governments and not of international organizations" (para. 55). As an alternative, the report suggests (para. 56) that an objective should aim at defining "the type of contribution that the international organization could make" to some global objective for which Member States are responsible and states (para. 57) that this contribution may consist of "work tools" to be provided to Member States.

10. The Secretary-General feels that the examples provided of such work tools ("complex machinery for co-operation", "a network of multipurpose institutions", "an instrument of co-operation within a regional area") suffer from the same lack of precision as most of the objectives in the current United Nations medium-term plan. It would also appear that these objectives are essentially Secretariat outputs, even if they are somewhat complex. In other words, it is felt that the search for limited but reasonably effective actions to be taken by international organizations - which would (a) go beyond the mere delivery of Secretariat outputs but (b) absolutely respect the sovereignty of Member States in whose territory the international organization has to act - has not yet succeeded in uncovering the new type of objective which the report hopes that the dialogue between Member States and the Secretariat would bring about. The Secretary-General expects that the formulation and review of the model medium-term plan programmes requested by CPC for its twentieth session will provide opportunity to explore further the concept of programme objectives of international organizations and that more precise guidance may thus be given to the Secretariat on the nature and content of objectives which would be somewhere within the gap referred to in paragraph 4 of the report.

## II. OBSERVATIONS AND PROPOSALS ON SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation I. Adoption of a plan with fixed-time horizons

11. At its nineteenth session, CPC discussed the issue of a fixed-horizon versus a rolling basis for the plan, but it has not yet reached a final conclusion. It has, however, recommended that the plan should cover a period of six years. 3/ Recommendations 1 (a) and 1 (b) are acceptable to the Secretary-General.

### Recommendation II. Establishment of an objective-based programme structure

#### (a) Recommendation II (a)

12. Recommendation II (a) proposes that United Nations activities should be classified into two categories: programmable and non-programmable. The present plan covers all substantive activities of the United Nations, including political activities. In one case, that of the special political affairs and special missions programme, the plan includes a description of activities as at the time of drafting, but no attempt to provide a strategy for the plan period, on the

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3/ Ibid., para. 72 (a).

ground that future activities of this nature are not predictable. Many other departments and offices, particularly in the political and humanitarian areas, consider that they face similar difficulties of prediction. In many (but not all) instances, however, these difficulties arise because the work involved is essentially the servicing of intergovernmental bodies and this work can be treated as a "continuous function" along the lines set out in recommendation II (c).

13. The Secretary-General has no strong objections to recommendation II (a). In his view, however,

(a) The plan should continue to contain descriptions of all programmes within the coverage determined by the General Assembly;

(b) The number of programmes that are categorized as non-programmable and so exempted from normal requirements of planning should be kept to a minimum.

(b) Recommendations II (b), (c) and (d)

14. The present-level programme structure is based on the following considerations:

(a) The major programme level derives from the requirement of presenting the plan in terms of sectors of activity rather than organizational units, as in the programme budget.

(b) The programme level derives from the need to have one level in the plan that provides a simple link with the programme budget and with administrative units. The programme level is in almost all cases equivalent to an appropriation line in the budget. Since the plan is conceived as providing the framework for the programme budget, some link, at one of the four programme levels, between programme categories and organizational units is and will remain needed. The existing link has proved easy to understand and to operate.

(c) The subprogramme level was conceived as the main unit of analysis in the plan, the level at which medium-term objectives and strategies were to be specified. While the actual subprogramme objectives in past plans leave a great deal to be desired, it is difficult to visualize time-limited objectives at the major programme or programme levels. As a consequence, the existence of a programming level between that of the programme and that of the programme element would still appear to be a logical necessity for programme planning in the United Nations.

(d) The programme element level is the lowest unit of programme analysis; its usefulness is not questioned in the report under review.

15. Past plans have specified objectives at the subprogramme level only and so the current structure is, in theory, an "objective based structure", as recommended in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit. The criticism of this report is that in practice such a structure was in most cases derived from existing administrative arrangements and the objectives made up to fit such

arrangements. This criticism has a great deal of validity and redefinitions of subprogrammes may be needed in some areas. In this connexion, the Secretary-General has no objection to the Unit's suggestion that "continuous function" activities be separated from activities that are directed towards time-limited objectives. This suggestion was contained in recommendation No. 1 of an earlier report of the Unit on programming and evaluation in the United Nations (A/33/226, chap. VII). In annex IV of the "in-depth study of the planning process" (E/AC.51/97/Add.2), the Secretary-General has tested the feasibility of such separation and of determining in three programmes what portions of these could be viewed as continuing functions. Although difficulties were encountered, none proved to be insurmountable.

16. At its nineteenth session, CPC asked the Secretary-General to prepare, for submission to it at its twentieth session in May 1980, model medium-term plan programmes that "would help clarify, in particular, the questions of the programme structure of the medium-term plan and the various levels of detail of programme narratives required by various reviewing bodies". <sup>4/</sup> In doing so, the Secretary-General will test the feasibility of recommendations II (b) and II (c) and will base his final response to these recommendations on experience drawn from this test and any recommendations that CPC makes with regard to plan methodology after its review of the models presented to it.

#### Recommendation III. Adoption of an "in-depth study" system

17. The proposals in subparagraph (b) relate to preliminary stages in the plan formulation, and the involvement in those stages of regional, sectoral and functional intergovernmental organs. The CPC has recommended such an involvement and there is no question that these organs will need to review preliminary versions of the medium-term plan. The Secretary-General does not consider that an additional set of "in-depth studies" is needed, over and above what has already been provided to CPC, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

18. In subparagraph (c), the proposal for "in-depth studies format 2", to be prepared at a rate of three to five per year and submitted to CPC, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, is similar to one of the options offered in the Secretary-General's report on an in-depth study of the planning process, namely, a "staggered planning" approach. This approach was rejected by CPC at its nineteenth session. <sup>5/</sup>

#### Recommendation IV. Adoption of a time-table for the preparation of the medium-term plan

19. At its nineteenth session, CPC requested the Secretary-General to submit to

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<sup>4/</sup> A/34/38 (part I), para. 73.

<sup>5/</sup> Ibid., para. 71 (d).

it at its twentieth session a draft calendar of preparation for the proposed medium-term plan for the period 1984-1989. In doing so, the various points raised by the report of the Joint Inspection Unit under recommendation IV will be taken into account.

Recommendation V. Presentation of policy description  
of major programmes

20. An analysis of the policy of the Organization is conceivable at the three upper programme levels, namely, major programme, programme and subprogramme. In order to avoid repetitions and to keep the planning documents to a manageable size, however, these analyses are currently submitted mainly at the subprogramme level, with a brief summary at the programme level in some cases. Policies of such a broad character as to correspond to the major programme level would seem to be more adequately described in the introduction to the medium-term plan and should probably deal with topics 1, 2 and 3 listed under recommendation V. Topics 4, 5 and 6 would normally continue to be dealt with at the subprogramme level. However, this list of topics can be taken into account in the preparation of the model programmes mentioned in paragraph 15 above. In these models, an attempt will be made to provide at least one sample narrative for each topic so that CPC can discuss its merits as a general requirement.

Recommendation VI. Role of the introduction to the medium-term plan  
in the establishment of priorities

21. The views of the Secretary-General on this subject have been presented to CPC by the Director-General 6/ and the Committee "agreed that the issues involved should be explored further before a carefully considered decision was made". 7/

Recommendation VII. Consultations with officials responsible for  
executing the major programmes on the  
improvement of the planning and programming  
methodologies

22. It has been the policy of the Secretary-General that the type of consultations recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit take place and it is intended to continue to follow this policy.

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6/ Ibid., paras. 55 to 69.

7/ Ibid., para. 69.