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ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

Rationalization of the procedures and organization  
of the General Assembly

Report of the Secretary-General

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\* A/34/50.

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. By resolution 2837 (XXVI) of 17 December 1971, the General Assembly approved the conclusions of the Special Committee on the Rationalization of the Procedures and Organization of the General Assembly, declared those conclusions to be useful and worthy of consideration by the Assembly, its committees and other relevant organs and decided that they should be reproduced as an annex to its rules of procedure (annex V). In the same resolution, the General Assembly decided to review from time to time the progress achieved in rationalizing its work and requested the Secretary-General, as appropriate, to report on the extent to which the conclusions of the Special Committee had been reflected in the practice of the General Assembly. During the thirty-third session, the Secretary-General indicated that he intended to report on this matter to the General Assembly at its thirty-fourth session.
2. It is the hope of the Secretary-General that, by submitting this report at the present time, all Members of the United Nations will have the opportunity to give full consideration to the recommendations in this report so that the General Assembly, at the very outset of its thirty-fourth session, may review its procedures with a view to rationalizing the work of the Organization. It is also hoped that this report will be duly taken into account by the Economic and Social Council at its summer session.
3. While many of the recommendations of the Special Committee have been implemented and have helped to expedite the work of the General Assembly, many others have not been implemented.
4. It has become increasingly clear in recent sessions of the General Assembly that the existing procedures need to be modified if the original schedule envisaged for each regular session is to be adhered to. It is quite apparent indeed that one cannot realistically hope that the General Assembly, whose membership has tripled since the inception of the Organization, can complete within the same period the consideration of an agenda consisting of four times the original number of items.
5. It should be emphasized that both the increased area of activity of the United Nations and the threefold increase in the membership are welcome developments, reflecting the emergence of more than 80 States from colonial status to that of independent and sovereign nations as well as the tremendous increase in the scope of subjects which the Members wish to have considered as matters of concern to the United Nations.
6. With this increase, however, have come substantially increased demands, both on the delegations and on the Secretariat. In addition to the large number of formal meetings of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, there has been a considerable increase in the number of informal meetings and the volume of documentation to be issued in the six working languages (originally the General Assembly had only two working languages) have more than tripled during the past 10 years.

7. It is almost inevitable that, in a period of rapid growth of this kind, certain practices will develop, sometimes carried forward through the force of inertia, which leave the Organization operating at less than its maximum potential efficiency and economy.

8. To make the General Assembly more responsive to the needs of its members, to reduce the number of demands on delegations and staff and to permit the Assembly to concentrate its efforts, in a more effective and significant way, on the major issues of our times, a number of changes could be made. It is self-evident that these changes can be effected only with the concurrence of Member States and only if it is realized that modifications of existing practices are in the interests of all. It is, however, the obligation of the Secretary-General to point out in which areas, in his judgement, the effectiveness of the Organization could be improved.

9. Of recent date, the heaviest workload has been noted in the Second, Third and Fifth Committees. Special attention needs to be given to the organization of work in those bodies. The entire field of financial implications and budgetary approval also deserves particular concentration.

10. Improvements in the work of the General Assembly can be as modest or as far-reaching as the members care to make them. On the side of minimum reform, for example, would be the stricter application of rules and procedures already approved; this alone could result in a significant saving of time and improvement of the Assembly's efficiency. Other proposals, of a more novel character, if approved by the membership, would help the Organization to cope more effectively with its increasingly heavy workload.

11. The following sections of the present report contain, under headings similar to those used by the Special Committee, a review of those recommendations which have not been or have been only partly implemented as well as additional recommendations aimed at rationalizing further the procedures of the General Assembly.

## II. GENERAL COMMITTEE

12. Although rule 42 provides that the General Committee "shall meet periodically throughout each session to review the progress of the General Assembly and its committees and to make recommendations for furthering such progress", the General Committee has rarely met after the first week of the session except to consider requests for the inclusion of additional items.

13. The Special Committee recommended that the General Committee should play a major role in advancing the rational organization and general conduct of the proceedings of the General Assembly (annex V, para. 11).

14. In the light of the above considerations, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) The General Committee should, at the outset of each session, consider how the work of the session can best be rationalized;

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(b) The General Committee should also meet periodically throughout the session to review the progress of work and to make recommendations to the General Assembly on the general programme of the session and on measures aimed at improving its work.

### III. AGENDA

#### A. Reduction in the number of items

15. While the duration of the regular sessions has varied little over the years, the number of agenda items has increased considerably. In the preliminary list of items to be included in the provisional agenda of the thirty-fourth session, the Secretariat has made a modest attempt at grouping some related items, for instance those dealing with elections (items 15 to 17), which accounts for the slight decrease in the number of items (121). It should be noted, however, that the Secretariat cannot exercise any discretion regarding the items to be listed since the draft agenda must contain all the items which the General Assembly decided to include in the provisional agenda and any new items requested for inclusion by Member States.

16. The Special Committee recommended that Member States should examine the agenda with a view to eliminating items which had lost their urgency or relevance, were not ripe for consideration or could be dealt with and even disposed of equally well by subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, and to referring specific items to other United Nations organs or to specialized agencies, taking into account the nature of the question (annex V, paras. 19 and 22).

17. In addition to the foregoing, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) Related items should be grouped under a single heading;

(b) More items should be staggered over two or more years;

(c) Whenever possible, resolutions requesting the discussion of a question at a subsequent session should not call for the inclusion of a separate new item; such discussion should be held under the item under which the resolution was adopted.

#### B. Allocation of agenda items

18. Rule 65 provides that the General Assembly "shall not, unless it decides otherwise, make a final decision upon any item on the agenda until it has received the report of a committee on that item". The purpose of this rule was evidently to enable Main Committees to discuss all substantive items before their consideration by the plenary. At recent sessions, items discussed directly in the plenary have become so numerous that the plenary is meeting almost continuously throughout the session. It has thus become nearly impossible for the General Assembly to devote the necessary attention both to those important items and to the reports of the Main Committees.

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19. The Secretary-General recommends that substantive items should normally be discussed initially in a Main Committee and, therefore, items previously allocated to plenary meetings should henceforth be referred to a Main Committee unless there are compelling circumstances requiring their continued consideration in the plenary.

#### IV. ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK OF THE MAIN COMMITTEES

20. The role of the Chairman of a Main Committee is of paramount importance for the effective performance of its work. Accordingly, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) Before the conclusion of a session of the General Assembly, regional groups should agree on the distribution of chairmanships for the following session and nominate their candidates for these posts, on the understanding that, should a candidate no longer be available to serve at the succeeding session, the group which nominated him would choose a replacement; this would afford all committee chairmen a substantial period to prepare thoroughly for their tasks;

(b) Nominees for committee chairmanship should be required to have two years' prior experience in the United Nations system;

(c) During sessions, the Chairmen or other officers of the Main Committees should be entrusted by their Committees, whenever appropriate, with the conduct of informal negotiations aimed at reaching agreement on specific issues;

(d) Chairmen of Main Committees should fully exercise their authority under rule 106 and, in particular, propose more frequently the limitation of the time to be allowed to speakers or of the number of times each representative may speak.

#### V. MAXIMUM UTILIZATION OF AVAILABLE TIME

##### A. Plenary Assembly

21. The Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) The practice of dispensing with the secret ballot for elections to subsidiary organs when the number of candidates corresponds to the number of seats to be filled should become standard and the same practice should apply to the election of the President and Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly;

(b) The practice of dealing with Second Committee items in the plenary whereby it is stated that "the positions of delegations regarding draft resolutions recommended by the Second Committee have been made clear in the Committee and are reflected in the relevant official records" should be extended to items from other committees;

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(c) In keeping with the intent of paragraph 51 of annex V to the rules of procedure, explanations of vote, interventions in the exercise of the right of reply and procedural motions should be made by delegations from their seats;

(d) To save the time of the Members on the final day of each session, which is usually one of the busiest, the Secretary-General recommends that consideration be given to dispensing with the practice of concluding statements by Chairmen of the regional groups.

B. Measures applicable both to the plenary Assembly and to the Main Committees

1. Opening of meetings at the scheduled time

22. In view of the considerable saving of time that would result from the prompt opening of meetings, the Secretary-General recommends that the quorum required for the opening of meetings under rules 67 and 108 should be waived, on the understanding that the presence of a majority of the Members would continue to be necessary for any decision to be taken.

2. Explanations of vote

23. In order to expedite the proceedings of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) Explanations of vote should be limited to a specified time period such as 10 minutes;

(b) When the same draft resolution is considered in a Main Committee and in the plenary, delegations should explain their vote only once, i.e., either in the Committee or in the plenary.

3. Right of reply

24. For several years the General Assembly has applied a limitation of 10 minutes to all interventions in the exercise of the right of reply. While there should, of course, be no question of preventing delegations from exercising their right of reply, the number and length of such interventions might be further limited. The Secretary-General therefore recommends that:

(a) The number of interventions in the exercise of the right of reply for any delegation at a given meeting should be limited to two per meeting;

(b) Any second intervention in the exercise of the right of reply for any delegation at a given meeting should be limited to five minutes.

#### 4. Resolutions

25. As a time-saving measure and in order to make the debates more meaningful, the Secretary-General recommends that subsidiary organs reporting to the General Assembly should submit draft resolutions in order to facilitate the consideration of the items while eliminating the need for co-sponsorship by individual delegations.

#### VI. DOCUMENTATION

26. The increase in documentation has become one of the most critical issues with which both Member States and the Secretariat are confronted. The number of reports of subsidiary organs has doubled in the past 10 years while the number of reports requested of the Secretary-General has more than tripled during the same period.

27. In order to contribute to the solution of this problem, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) Subsidiary organs should be required to submit their reports at least six weeks before the opening of the session so that they may be available in time in all working languages;

(b) No reports should contain a compilation of other previous documents.

(c) Subsidiary organs should not annex to their reports summary records of their meetings or other material which were already distributed to all Members;

(d) The General Assembly, including its Main Committees, should merely note and neither debate nor adopt resolutions on those reports of the Secretary-General or subsidiary organs which do not require specific action by the Assembly;

(e) The General Assembly should review periodically the need for summary records of its subsidiary organs;

(f) Communications from Member States should be circulated as documents of the General Assembly only if they call for action to be taken by the Assembly.

#### VII. SUBSIDIARY ORGANS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

28. Subsidiary organs constitute an essential means of ensuring the continuity of the work of the General Assembly between sessions. Nevertheless, the sharp increase in the number of subsidiary organs of the Assembly has created problems, not only in connexion with documentation, as described above, but also in the provision of conference services.

29. The Secretary-General therefore recommends that:

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(a) The General Assembly should, beginning at the thirty-fourth session, review the usefulness of those subsidiary organs which have been unable to submit concrete recommendations;

(b) A moratorium on the establishment of additional subsidiary organs should be declared for a period of one year.

#### VIII. PLANNING OF MEETINGS

30. As a result of the substantial increase in the number of subsidiary organs and in the requests for meetings of ad hoc working groups and for informal meetings and consultations, it has become more and more difficult to meet all the needs for conference services.

31. In order to alleviate this critical situation, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) The Committee on Conferences should be authorized to play a more effective role in the planning of meetings and in the use of conference facilities;

(b) No subsidiary organ of the General Assembly should be permitted to meet at United Nations Headquarters during a regular session of the Assembly, unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly;

(c) The Main Committees which require the largest number of meetings should be encouraged to hold more meetings early in the session in order to ensure a better distribution of meetings over the whole session.

#### IX. BUDGETARY AND FINANCIAL QUESTIONS

32. As noted in paragraph 9 of the introduction, the management of the budgetary cycle, including financial implications, and the work of the Fifth Committee are among the activities producing serious and consistent bottle-necks in the procedures of the General Assembly.

33. As minimal steps to deal with this problem, the Secretary-General recommends that:

(a) A mandatory deadline, not later than 1 December, should be established for the submission to the Fifth Committee of all draft resolutions with financial implications;

(b) The Fifth Committee should, as a general practice, consider accepting without debate the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on the financial implications of draft resolutions up to a prescribed limit (e.g. \$25,000 on any one item);

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(c) The General Assembly should set firm deadlines for the early submission of the reports of subsidiary bodies which require consideration by the Fifth Committee;

(d) A minimum period of 48 hours should be allowed between the submission and the voting of a proposal involving expenditure in order to allow the Secretary-General to prepare and present the related statement of administrative and financial implications.

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