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PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1980-1981

The identification of activities that are completed,
obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective

Second report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the identification of activities that are completed, obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective (A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1). The report was submitted in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 33/204 of 29 January 1979.

2. In its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1980-1981 the Committee welcomed the increased attention being paid by the Secretary-General to the redeployment of resources. The Committee also welcomed the information provided under certain programmes in sections 6 and 10 concerning the termination of programme elements deemed to be obsolete, ineffective or of marginal usefulness. 1/ In document A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1 the Secretary-General summarizes the results of the exercise for 10 of the 17 sections of the proposed programme budget for 1980-1981 which cover the economic and social activities of the Organization.

3. The question of the determination of activities that have been completed or are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective has been before the General Assembly since its thirtieth session, and has been addressed in four resolutions (3534 (XXX) of 17 December 1975, 31/93 of 14 December 1976, 32/201 of 21 December 1977 and 33/204 of 29 January 1979). The report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1) is the first report which contains quantified data on the completion and termination of programme elements and the consequential

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-fourth Session,
Supplement No. 7 (A/34/7), chap. I, para. 27.

release of staff resources. In this connexion the Advisory Committee recalls that, in response to recommendations by the Joint Inspection Unit, the Secretary-General has already taken steps towards better identification of output in the programme budget (A/C.5/34/2), and the establishment of internal work programmes and procedures for reporting on programme implementation (A/C.5/34/3). The Committee understands that the data reported in document A/C.5/34/4 and Add.1 have been collected as a result of the introduction of these measures. Indeed, it is clear from the report by the Secretary-General that the main emphasis so far has been on improved measurement of resources released through completions of project elements, rather than on how best to determine which programme elements should be terminated. The Committee believes that as monitoring of the use of resources is improved it should become possible for the Secretary-General to submit a more comprehensive and accurate report on the resources released through both the completion and the termination of programme elements.

4. In the course of its consideration of the Secretary-General's report, the Advisory Committee received an advance, unedited text of chapter VI of the report of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination on the work of its nineteenth session. In paragraph 11 of that chapter CPC states:

"With regard to the identification of activities that had been completed, were obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective, it was generally felt that the information contained in the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1) was clearly inadequate. It was stressed that the identification of such activities should be prepared by the Secretariat where the necessary programme information which would support intergovernmental programme review was available" (A/34/38 (Part V)).

5. In most cases, programme budget proposals for individual programmes are likely to include a core of programme elements carried forward from the base biennium plus new programme elements the requirements for which would be met, in whole or in part, by resources released through the completion or termination of programme elements in the base biennium. In the case of several organizational units the information provided by them and summarized in table 2 of the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/34/4) is consistent with such a pattern. On the other hand, the data furnished by several other organizational units indicate that all the professional resources will continue to be used for programme elements already in progress, that none were released as a result of completions and terminations in 1978-1979 and that none will be used for new programme elements in 1980-1981.

6. The Advisory Committee was informed that the latter situation is sometimes the result of differences in the approach of individual programme managers to the relationship between "programme elements" and "outputs". Where a programme element includes a single output the production of the latter will mean that the programme element has been terminated and staffing resources have become available for reassignment. But where a "programme element" is deemed to contain several unconnected outputs it will often be reported as "still in progress" even though most of the outputs have been produced and staffing resources have been released.

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There is therefore need to continue work on the conceptual framework in the interest of greater uniformity in the relationship of programme elements to outputs, so as to ensure that the data submitted by various organizational units are based on a common understanding of the requirements.

Completions

7. Table 2 (A/C.5/34/4) shows that completion or termination in 1978-1979 of programme elements budgeted for under sections 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 22 and 23 released 2,967 work months of professional staff resources. Eighteen programme elements were terminated. As can be seen from the annex to the report, those terminations released 32 work months of resources. The balance of 2,935 work months therefore relates to the completion of programme elements. The Advisory Committee notes in this connexion that inasmuch as the data did not cover all the budget sections in the economic and social area and, also, were compiled half a year before the end of the biennium the total volume of resources released through the termination of programme elements will be larger than has been indicated in document A/C.5/34/4 and Corr.1. Thus, even though the accuracy of the estimate is open to question for the reasons given above, it shows none the less that the United Nations is capable of undertaking a substantial volume of new programme elements within the level of already approved resources.

Terminations

8. While the results achieved in the course of the preparation of the programme budget proposals for 1980-1981 in identifying programme elements that should be terminated because they are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective, have been very modest indeed, they represent the beginning of a process called for by the General Assembly in the resolutions listed in paragraph 3 above. At the same time the Advisory Committee is aware that the identification of programme elements which can be considered obsolete, marginally useful or ineffective can raise considerations which are political rather than administrative or managerial. In this connexion the Committee notes the information in paragraphs 9 and 10 of document A/C.5/34/4 to the effect that the permanent representatives held the view that the recommendations of the Secretary-General must precede the exercise of judgement in this matter by Member States. The Advisory Committee also notes the conceptual difficulties listed in paragraph 29 of the report of the Secretary-General.

9. The need to redeploy resources to meet new requirements is not confined to the United Nations itself. In the course of its meetings with representatives of the Executive heads of the specialized agencies the Advisory Committee was informed that several of them had carried out a reassessment of resources allocated to individual programmes with a view to redeploying additional resources to priority areas, and had reflected the consequential changes in their programme budget proposals to the intergovernmental organs concerned. The Committee will seek further information on this question from the specialized agencies and will report thereon to the General Assembly, as necessary, in the context of future reports on administrative and budgetary co-ordination of the United Nations with the specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

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10. At a time when Member States are called upon to pay more by way of assessed contributions because of budgetary increases attributable to inflation and currency instability, the ability of the Organization to undertake new activities in priority areas will be greater if it can identify and eliminate existing activities that are obsolete, of marginal usefulness or ineffective. In the circumstances, the Advisory Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will intensify his efforts to that end and make appropriate proposals as soon as possible to the competent intergovernmental organs.
