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REPORT OF THE GROUP OF EXPERTS ON THE PROGRAMME OF WORK*

Report by the Chairperson of the Group of Experts

1. Since the sixtieth session of the Commission, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work (GEPW) has met on 10 occasions between March and December 2005, including six meetings held jointly with the officers of the committees responsible for implementing the Commission's programme of work, with the exception of the Inland Transport Committee.
2. Following the session of the Commission, Mr. Michele Coduri, of the Permanent Mission of Switzerland, and Mr. Edgars Kalniņš, of the Permanent Mission of Latvia, were re-elected as Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the Group of Experts respectively.

* Late submission due to the postponement of the decision concerning the dates and the agenda of the annual session of the Commission, awaiting the conclusion of UNECE reform.

3. The Group of Experts was called upon to support the process of reform and to examine a number of issues, in particular:

- Improving the information flow between the secretariat and member States and between the bodies of the Commission;
- Preparing specific activities;
- Implementing the decisions of the Commission.

I. REFORM

4. UNECE reform was the central process of 2005. During the first half of the year, the team of authors of the report on the state of UNECE evaluated the Commission, the environment in which it operates and the needs of member States, and produced a report in June containing a series of recommendations. During this period, in accordance with its terms of reference, the Group of Experts assisted the process by serving as a forum for dialogue between member States and the team of evaluators and by enabling member States to follow the progress of the work of the team of authors.

5. Within the framework of the process of intergovernmental negotiation that followed the presentation of the report of the external evaluators and which led to the Commission's decision of 2 December 2005 (E/ECE/1434/Rev.1), the Chairperson of the Group of Experts carried out the functions of Vice-Chairperson of the Open-ended Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee.

II. IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION FLOW

6. As the Commission had recognized the need to strengthen dialogue between member States, the secretariat and the various bodies of the Commission, the Group of Experts discussed the various measures proposed by the secretariat to improve communication between the secretariat and the member States. On that basis, the secretariat has taken the following initial measures: lists of participants at Committee and working group meetings will be sent by e-mail to the permanent missions in Geneva before each meeting; the secretariat will send letters to Ministers only if action is needed at the ministerial level, in which case the letters will be signed by the Executive Secretary and sent via the permanent missions. These measures may be supplemented when the Executive Committee discusses the issue again with a view to improving communication within UNECE.

7. The Group of Experts also held meetings jointly with the officers of the various committees of the Commission, with the exception of the Inland Transport Committee. At each of these meetings, the Chairperson of the principal subsidiary body presented the strategies, the areas of activity and the priorities of its subprogramme to the Group of Experts. The discussions also covered cooperation with other international organizations working on similar issues in the region, as well as the possibility of setting up intersectoral activities and, where appropriate, partnerships with the private sector.

8. These meetings enabled the representatives of the committees and the members of the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work to exchange views and hold a dialogue. The Chairperson of the Group of Experts also took the opportunity to inform the officers of the committees about recent developments concerning the detailed report of the state of UNECE and its reform.

III. PREPARING SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES AT THE REQUEST OF THE COMMISSION

9. In the spring, the Group of Experts held a preliminary exchange of views on proposed topics for the Spring Seminar so that the secretariat could define a topic to propose to the Commission. On 2 December, in the light of its decision on reform, the Commission requested the Group of Experts to discuss when would be the most appropriate time to hold the Spring Seminar. The Group concluded that it would be preferable to postpone the Spring Seminar until 2007. This decision would not affect the possibility of organizing a thematic seminar linked to the Commission's new subprogramme of work at the inaugural meeting of the new Committee on Economic Cooperation and Integration set up under the reform.

10. At the Commission's request, GEPW drew up an agenda, a format and a list of participants for the second Regional Implementation Forum on Sustainable Development and invited the member States to contribute towards its funding. The Forum was held on 15 and 16 December 2005.

IV. IMPLEMENTING THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSION, INCLUDING THE REFORM

11. In order to improve the visibility of the implementation of the Commission's decisions, the Group of Experts decided that it was necessary to introduce a monitoring tool. This tool (E/ECE/1440/Add.1), if taken up by the Executive Committee, would provide a regularly updated overview. It could also be used to monitor the implementation of the reform.

12. Implementing the reform will be a priority in 2006 and will be primarily the responsibility of the secretariat of the Executive Committee, once it is established. In that regard, the Chairperson of the Group of Experts stresses that a series of decisions taken recently by the Commission complement the reform.

13. Some of the decisions need to be adapted, however, in particular:

- The budget programming procedure adopted by the Commission at its sixtieth annual session (E/ECE/1423/Add.1) will need to be adapted to the new governance structure;
- The guidelines for the establishment and functioning of teams of specialists within UNECE (E/ECE/1407/Add.1) will need to be revised, also taking account of the experience that has been accumulated since they were adopted in 2003, and extended to the permanent subsidiary bodies operating under the responsibility of the sectoral committees.

14. Particular attention will need to be paid to the various aspects of technical cooperation. In this regard, the Executive Committee could develop its work using the strategy and the various mechanisms adopted by the Commission during 2003 and 2004.

15. The implementation of the activity evaluation system under the direction of the sectoral committees in accordance with the recommendation by the Group of Experts adopted by the Commission in 2004 (E/ECE/1415/Add.1) has experienced significant delays. On 2 December 2005, the Commission confirmed the validity of this recommendation. It is vital to speed up the implementation of the planned measures, and to develop a general guide presenting the evaluation methods that are likely to facilitate the biennial evaluation that the committees are required to carry out.

16. The resource allocation among the subprogrammes of the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (section 23 of the programme budget) should be reviewed before 2 February 2006, in accordance with the Work Plan on ECE reform (E/ECE/1434/Rev.1, para. 74). The Group of Experts should therefore address this issue at the start of 2006.

V. PREPARING THE 2008-2009 STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE COMMISSION

17. Before its dissolution on 21 February 2006, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work should also look at the strategic framework for 2008-2009, thus concluding its activities by achieving one of its original tasks.

VI. CONCLUSION

18. The Group of Experts was created in 1997 to be principally an advisory body in the reform of the Programme of Work and the modification of resource allocation. Since 1997, driven by member States and the Commission, its area of activity has progressively broadened. Increasingly, the Commission has assigned it specific mandates, and member States have used it to strengthen governance and dialogue with the secretariat. The Group of Experts has therefore become a privileged forum for interaction between member States and the secretariat, in which responses to specific questions have been given and numerous draft decisions have been negotiated before their adoption by the Commission.

19. The Group has responded in a practical way to the increased need for member States to direct the activities of the Commission and to modernize its structure and operation. It has also helped prepare the way for the reform negotiated by member States and adopted by the Commission on 2 December 2005.

20. In the context of increasing activities, the Group of Experts has proved itself. However, it has reached its limits owing to a lack of decision-making ability against the background of an overly complex governance structure. The creation of the Executive Committee with decision-making powers, replacing among others the Group of Experts, will fill this gap. Rationalization of the governance structure will allow the Commission to strengthen its activity and become more efficient, which is in the interest of all member States.