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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Eighth session
Item 15 of the Provisional Agenda

LOCAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEES OR INFORMATION GROUPS

(Note by the Secretary-General)

1. At its seventh session the Secretary-General submitted to the Commission on Human Rights a Memorandum on Local Human Rights Committees and Information Groups (E/CN.4/519). In this Memorandum the replies of Governments to resolution 2/9 of the Economic and Social Council, in which Members of the United Nations were invited to consider the desirability of setting up these groups, were analysed, and attention was drawn to the recommendations of the Social Commission regarding national committees and working groups on social questions and to the establishment of national commissions under the auspices of UNESCO. Certain observations were also made regarding the functions which local human rights committees or groups might perform.

2. The purpose of this Note is to draw the attention of the Commission to a recommendation of its Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities regarding national human rights committees or groups, and of the action taken by the Social Commission and by UNESCO since the above mentioned Memorandum was prepared.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE
SUB-COMMISSION ON PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND PROTECTION
OF MINORITIES

3. At its fourth session, held in October 1950, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities made certain recommendations. Among these was a suggestion that the Economic and Social Council "recommend to Governments, Members of the United Nations, that they encourage the establishment of national and local committees composed of highly qualified persons, including members of minorities, if any, to study and survey the extent to which measures of discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, religion, or language may exist in law or in fact within territories under their jurisdiction, and to recommend to their governments legal, educational and other appropriate means whereby such discrimination may be eliminated and prevented from occurring in the future". This recommendation was adopted by 8 votes to 2, with 2 abstentions (E/CN.4/641, paragraph 60, resolution I, part A III).

ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL COMMITTEES AND WORKING GROUPS
ON SOCIAL QUESTIONS

4. In the Memorandum submitted to the Commission at its seventh session, attention was drawn to the fact that national committees and national working groups had been established in some countries to work in the social field. Reference was made therein to the work of the Social Commission and of the Secretariat in this connexion (E/CN.4/519, paragraphs 7 and 8). Working groups in the fields of social defence, housing and town and country planning, family, youth and child welfare have been established in a certain number of countries.

5. At its seventh session, held in March and April 1951, the Social Commission considered this question in the light of the experience reported in documents E/CN.5/225, E/CN.5/242 and Corr.1, and E/CN.5/243. The Commission expressed itself in favour of the establishment of national committees or working groups and hoped that such bodies would be created in every country. It recognized that their organization, structure and membership must necessarily vary from country to country and that the Commission could not establish any particular pattern which would apply in all cases. A general distinction was however drawn between the functions of national committees and of working groups. The committees were envisaged as bodies to co-ordinate the work of various government departments on social questions in relation to the work of the United Nations and of the specialized agencies. The task of the working groups on the other hand was to provide the Secretariat with expert technical knowledge or opinion on particular questions in the social field. The Social Commission was informed that in Yugoslavia an active role had been assigned to working groups; they not only collected information but also assisted in carrying out social policies recommended by the Commission (E/1952, paragraphs 10 - 19).

ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL COMMISSIONS UNDER THE AUSPICES OF
UNESCO

6. By 15 October 1951, out of sixty-four States members of UNESCO, fifty-five had established national commissions in accordance with Article VII of the Constitution. In addition to the countries listed in document E/CN.4/519 (paragraph 9) national commissions have been formed in Afghanistan, Bolivia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Israel, Laos, Liberia, Monaco, Sweden and Yugoslavia.

7. Each national commission has its own characteristics, structure and methods of work. UNESCO has however suggested certain general principles for the organization and the functions of these commissions (See Handbook of National Commissions, 1951, UNESCO publications No. 907). It may perhaps be noted that among the proposals for the participation of national commissions in the execution of the UNESCO programme for 1952 (UNESCO/XR/16) suggestions are made, as in 1951, as to how the commissions might be used to spread the concept of human rights and the principles proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the press, radio, films and exhibitions and in arranging for the celebration of Human Rights Day. Suggestions are also made as to how the national commissions might consider ways and means of introducing into the school curricula the teaching of the principles of the Declaration and of arousing the interest of young people generally and increasing their knowledge about the Declaration.

8. At its sixth session the General Conference of UNESCO had before it the reports of Member States submitted in accordance with Article VII of the Constitution (UNESCO document 6C/4). In accordance with the recommendation of its fifth session these reports contained information concerning the establishment of national commissions and their activities. The General Conference of UNESCO, at its sixth session, examined the report of its Committee on Reports of Member States and adopted the recommendations of this Committee on 10 July 1951. The Committee stated in its report (6C/Resolution (VII)) that not enough space was given in the annual reports to the activities of established National Commissions which were collaborating regularly with the Secretariat. It stated also that in a number of instances

the National Commissions were not yet effective or had been formed too recently to be able to report on their work. The Committee also pointed out that UNESCO's "effective contribution to the cause of peace" would be attained to the degree that its annual programme was put into operation by the Member States and their National Commissions. It further stated its opinion that the reports of Member States should in future include a survey of the activities of the National Commissions, with more precise information on their functioning and work (meetings, permanent secretariat, executive committee, specialized committees, alterations in the structure of the Commission, etc.).

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