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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1978-1979

Establishment of an information services unit in the Department of
International Economic and Social Affairs

Third report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the Secretary-General's report on the establishment of an information services unit in the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs (A/C.5/33/4).
2. The report has been submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 32/212, section V of which reads:

"The General Assembly

...

1. Takes note of the reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on the question of the establishment of an information services unit in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat (A/32/256 and Add.1);
2. Decides that the acceptance by the Secretary-General of the offer of voluntary funds in 1978-1979 would not imply any commitment on the part of the Organization subsequently to transfer the costs of the operation to the regular budget;
3. Authorizes the Secretary-General to proceed in accordance with the proposal contained in paragraph 5 of his report (A/C.5/32/47);

4. Requests the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its thirty-third session on the progress achieved with respect to the work carried out in 1978 so that the Assembly can pronounce itself on whether computerization should be undertaken."
3. The Advisory Committee notes that progress achieved by the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs during 1978 in carrying out an inventory of documents and their systematic processing for indexing and retrieval in computer-ready format has been less than expected. The Secretary-General's representatives informed the Committee that the delay was attributable to the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the Secretariat pursuant to General Assembly resolution 32/197. One consequence of the restructuring has been the division of the files of the old Department of Economic Affairs between the two new departments, the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs and the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development. According to the Secretary-General's representatives, of the 20,000 pieces of material referred to in paragraph 5 of document A/C.5/32/47, approximately 6,000 remain with the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs.
4. To date 1,000 pieces of material have been selected by five organizational units of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs as containing information of lasting value. Of these, the Information Services Unit has processed approximately 600 into computer-ready worksheets. The Information Services Unit expects to process approximately 4,000 pieces of material by the end of 1979 (A/C.5/33/4, paras.12, 14 and 22). In response to questions from the Advisory Committee, the Secretary-General's representatives reported that the Information Services Unit has been processing the most recent material first and has been working its way backwards in time in regard to older material at the rate of 10 documents a day. The items being processed include material which - though considered to be currently important - would not necessarily remain in the information system on a permanent basis. The Secretary-General's representatives expressed the opinion that the proposed system would encourage the wider use of available material.
5. In response to inquiries, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Electronic Data Processing and Information Systems Service had not been associated with the work of the Information Services Unit. It is also the Committee's understanding that the indexing vocabulary used by the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs differs from that of the bibliographical information system (UNBIS) operated by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, and that the information system being developed by that Department cannot be regarded as a subsystem of UNBIS, notwithstanding the indications in paragraph 3 of the report of the Secretary-General in document A/C.5/31/69 that it was envisaged that the proposed system of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs should be a subsystem of UNBIS.
6. The Advisory Committee notes from the medium-term plan for the period 1980-1983 (A/33/6 (Parts 1 to 30)) that not only the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs but also the Department of Technical Co-operation for

Development has included in its respective subprogramme narratives in chapter 30 plans for the establishment and development of computer-assisted information systems and services. The Secretary-General has not, so far, submitted any proposals for an information system for the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development.

7. In the opinion of the Advisory Committee, the emergence of unco-ordinated departmental information systems in the economic and social sectors would militate against the establishment of an integrated data base covering both published and unpublished materials. The result of this would be that potential users, including Governments, would be required to conduct a series of searches using different indexing vocabularies, each of which would apply to only part of the available information.

8. In the circumstances, the Advisory Committee recommends that all the parties concerned should be brought together without delay under the auspices of the Information Systems Board so that the worksheets already produced in the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs can be reviewed and a common approach can be agreed to ensure the integration of the data bases.

9. The Advisory Committee recommends further that the Secretary-General submit to the General Assembly at its thirty-fourth session a report which would (a) acquaint the Assembly with the outcome of the exercise referred to in the preceding paragraph and indicate clearly whether the proposed Department of International Economic and Social Affairs system would be a subsystem of UNBIS; (b) indicate the progress made in selecting unpublished material in that Department's files that is considered suitable for computerization; (c) acquaint the Assembly with the Secretary-General's intentions as regards unpublished material in the files of the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development; and (d) furnish a detailed breakdown of the estimated start-up and operating costs of his proposals.

10. Accordingly, the Advisory Committee recommends that decision on whether computerization of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs should be undertaken be deferred until the thirty-fourth session of the General Assembly.
