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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1978-1979

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

Note by the Secretary-General

1. In response to a request made by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions of the General Assembly at its 28th meeting on 27 October 1977, this note provides additional information on the proposal to establish an information services unit in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as contained in the Secretary-General's report on this subject (A/C.5/31/69). This note also takes into account the discussion of the subject at the 27th and 28th meetings of the Advisory Committee on 26 and 27 October 1977.
2. The major objectives of the proposed information services unit, the problems addressed and the phases of implementation of the proposal, as contained in paragraphs 10 through 14 of document A/C.5/31/69, remain essentially the same.
3. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, after reviewing the proposal, stated in paragraph 5 of its related report (A/32/256) that it agreed "that it is desirable that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and other potential users should have access to selected information of lasting value contained in unpublished reports available in the Department". It suggested, however, that, as a first step, the Department should draw up an inventory of existing material, and, on the basis of the findings on what materials would be of permanent interest, identify potential users and determine whether the value and nature of the material would be such as to warrant the establishment of the proposed computer-based information storage and retrieval system.
4. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs understands the caution with which the Advisory Committee had decided to approach the implementation of the proposal to establish an information services unit. It is noted, however, that in its report the Advisory Committee concentrated on only one of the three major objectives of the proposed unit. Whereas the Advisory Committee focused only on

the function of making the bulk of the Department's unpublished project- and research-related information readily accessible to users, it is also envisaged that the proposed unit would:

(a) Co-ordinate the sectoral information services in various units of ESA which have been established in response to recent mandates of legislative bodies, and guide and assist these units in the technical aspects of information retrieval and dissemination, and

(b) Assist Member States in identifying and obtaining helpful project- and research-related information maintained by ESA and advise them in respect of establishing linkages with appropriate international information systems, such as those related to population, human settlements, marine science and coastal technology. The availability of such information and linkages would constitute a basis for increased technical co-operation among developing countries. The Department also needs to ensure that its information systems and related activities are concerted, in the interests of efficiency and economy, with those of other parts of the United Nations system, such as the International Referral System of the United Nations Environment Programme and the information retrieval systems already in existence in the International Labour Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the Economic Commission for Latin America. Such a co-operative effort would indeed eliminate a considerable amount of duplication, while, at the same time, enlarging the information base of all concerned.

5. In compliance with the wishes of the Advisory Committee, an effort was made to take an inventory of the existing material and to make a preliminary determination of what is of continuing value. About 20,000 pieces of material have accumulated during the last five years which have to be processed and systematically stored for future retrieval. The determination of what is to be actually retained involves the same degree of examination of the material as would be required to process it for categorization and cross-referencing according to established criteria. To perform this time-consuming operation exclusively for the purpose of an inventory would actually be an expensive use of a great deal of Professional staff time. It is therefore proposed that, while the inventory is being conducted, the information be processed in such a way as to be "computer-ready", should such a technique prove appropriate in due course.

6. An ad hoc departmental Information Systems Task Force was recently established to provide for much-needed co-ordination and policy formulation in respect of information-related activities. The Task Force prepared a survey of such activities which revealed the following:

(a) A strong indication of the necessity for consolidation of facilities and intradepartmental collaboration, particularly in respect of nine document-based information and reference units in ESA where similar activities are being carried

out, in most cases on a part-time basis, 1/ and most of which are currently organized and operated after a conventional document library model, using index cards for retrieval purposes. While the subject coverage of each unit is slanted towards the substantive interests of each parent office or division, there exists overlapping coverage.

(b) Moreover, since these reference units are operating independently and are using manual storage/retrieval systems, it is not possible for anyone to obtain a reliable overview of activities, past and present, carried out within ESA without conducting an elaborate search of information. Hence, Professionals working in one division are deprived of information stored in other divisions, although their fields of interest may be interrelated.

(c) If these reference units could gradually be centralized, a fair amount of duplication could be eliminated and the supply of information could be considerably improved both in terms of quality and quantity.

(d) If electronic data-processing equipment were used for establishing and searching the data base for the retrieval of information, it would be possible to have access to all pertinent information on a given subject as contained in all ESA files located in various reference units.

7. While a modest beginning has been made in respect of intradepartmental co-ordination and consolidation, it is, however, practically impossible for an ad hoc Task Force - whose members already have assigned full-time programme responsibilities - to carry out effective co-ordination and technical backstopping of numerous sectoral activities of this nature on a day-to-day basis. The departmental policy regarding sectoral information services-related activities could be better formulated and implemented on a consistent basis if this function were to be performed by a central unit which would have responsibility for backstopping and co-ordination as one of its primary objectives. The single central "processing unit" for ESA would classify and index incoming information received by the various parts of the Department.

8. Following the suggestions by the Advisory Committee, as described in paragraph 3 above, concerning a phased operation, it would seem advisable to reduce the trial period from three to two years. During 1978, the small central unit, composed of technically competent staff, would conduct the inventory of materials along the lines suggested in paragraph 5 of this note. A progress report would be submitted to the Advisory Committee towards the end of 1978. If it were confirmed that there was justification for a computer-based system, then the information

1/ These nine document-based information and reference units are located in the Centre for Development Planning, Projections and Policies, Population Division, Centre for Natural Resources, Energy and Transport, Centre for Housing, Building and Planning, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Ocean Economics and Technology Office, Office of Technical Co-operation, Office for Science and Technology and Division of Public Administration and Finance.

abstracted would be computerized and the processing of current material, and, progressively, segments of the backlog, would be undertaken in 1979.

9. During 1978 and 1979, work would also be initiated in respect of the technical backstopping and co-ordination of the informational activities of the various programmes of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as well as laying the basis for interface with other information systems in the United Nations family of organizations.

10. At the end of this two-year period, the Joint Inspection Unit could be requested to assess the desirability of continuing the operation of the unit and to submit its recommendations to the Assembly at its thirty-fourth session.

11. For the two-year trial period, the proposed information services unit could function, relying on extrabudgetary resources, with one post at the P-5 level, one at the P-3 level, one at the G-5 level and one at the G-4 level. This staff would be recruited on a temporary basis in order not to prejudice the issue of the transfer of these expenditures from extrabudgetary financing to the regular budget. During the first year of the trial period, there would be no recourse to computer support and only a minimal amount of equipment and specialized services would be used, thus bringing down the total estimated cost for the first year to \$147,000 from the amount of \$235,290 envisaged for 1978 in document A/C.5/31/69. The slightly increased outlay for these items in the second year of the trial period, including the possible recourse to computer support, would amount to \$196,680, as against the amount of \$236,220 indicated in the original document. The total estimated costs of the unit for the biennium 1978-1979 would therefore amount to \$343,680.

12. The following table shows the manpower and financial requirements in detail for the proposed two-year trial period.

MANPOWER AND FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS

The proposed budget for the ESA information services unit
 for the biennium 1978-1979

<u>Component</u>	<u>Extrabudgetary funds</u> (In United States dollars)	
	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>
1. <u>Staff (salaries and common staff costs)</u>		
Unit Chief (P-5)	49,200	51,300
Document Analyst (P-3)	34,000	35,300
Research Assistant (G-5)	22,300	23,700
Secretary (G-4)	<u>16,200</u>	<u>17,300</u>
Subtotal	121,700	127,600

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<u>Component</u>	<u>Extrabudgetary funds</u>	
	(In United States dollars)	
	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>
2. <u>Travel</u>		
Consultations with agencies and regional commissions	2,500	2,700
3. <u>Equipment</u>		
1 microfiche reader/printer		3,600
Related supplies for reader/printer		200
10 file cabinets (\$100 each)	500	500
1 microfiche cabinet		200
1 word-processing machine	<u>5,000</u>	
Subtotal	5,500	<u>4,500</u>
4. <u>Specialized services</u>		
Reference resources	500	1,000
Microfiche production (\$2.50 per 60-page document)	<u> </u>	<u>7,500</u>
Subtotal	500	<u>8,500</u>
5. <u>Reimbursement for supplies and services provided to the Unit</u>		
(i) <u>EDPIS support</u> ^{2/}		
Terminal rental)		5,000
Data storage cost) -		
Computer time and services)		
(500 hours per year))		34,800
Professional support) -		
(P-3 level))		
Subtotal	<u> </u>	<u>39,800</u>

^{2/} Estimate prepared in consultation with the Electronic Data Processing and Information Systems Service of the United Nations, as it is assumed that the General Assembly would prefer the Department to use EDPIS facilities.

Extrabudgetary funds
(In United States dollars)

	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>
(ii) <u>General services and supplies</u>		
Office space rental	10,400	10,800
Office furniture	2,860	
Typewriters	1,100	
Supplies	640	680
Communications (telephone, cable etc.)	<u>1,800</u>	<u>2,100</u>
Subtotal	<u>16,800</u>	<u>13,580</u>
Grand Total	<u>147,000</u>	<u>196,680</u>
