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REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC AND
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DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL
ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION;
RESTRUCTURING OF THE ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL SECTORS OF THE
UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM
JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Second regular session of 1984
Item 6 of the provisional
agenda**
RESTRUCTURING OF THE ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL SECTORS OF THE
UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM,
INCLUDING THE REVITALIZATION
OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COUNCIL

Reporting to the Economic and Social Council

Addendum

Comments of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly and to the Economic and Social Council his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Reporting to the Economic and Social Council" (A/39/281-E/1984/81 and Add.1).

* A/39/50.

** E/1984/100.

I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "Reporting to the Economic and Social Council" (JIU/REP/84/7) contains useful recommendations and provides an important input to the review of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977 by the Assembly at its thirty-ninth session.
2. The report of the Inspector was not received until the third week of May. Thus, sufficient time has not been available to finalize the comments by the Secretary-General on the diverse and wide-ranging recommendations, some of which have important policy and institutional implications and require careful and detailed consideration by a number of Secretariat entities. Nevertheless, to facilitate the discussion on the report by the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General is submitting his comments to the Council while noting the need for further examination within the Secretariat of the issues involved. The Secretary-General will take the Inspector's report into account, together with other reports of JIU on individual departments and offices, in submitting his report on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system to the General Assembly at its thirty-ninth session, as called for by the Assembly in its decision 37/442 of 20 December 1982.
3. The report presents a wide-ranging critique of the structures and functioning of intergovernmental bodies and Secretariat support services and is broader in its coverage than the title of the report suggests. The report seeks, through the example of the Economic and Social Council, to highlight the problem of relations between the Secretariat and intergovernmental organs and to suggest ways and means "to reduce to some extent the misunderstandings, frustrations and organizational difficulties which prevent their co-operation from achieving full effectiveness" (para. 6). The report attempts to do this, through an examination of selected documents chosen "for their significance and their importance with respect to three of the essential functions performed by the Organization, functions to which the Council makes a particularly important contribution" (para. 7): the functions of defining policies, co-ordinating plans and programmes at the level of the United Nations system and planning and programming for the United Nations.
4. As one of his main conclusions, the Inspector has stated that to enhance the effectiveness of the Economic and Social Council in undertaking those three essential functions, it is necessary for intergovernmental bodies, including the Committee for Development Planning and the Committee for Programme Co-ordination, to draw upon outside expertise. The Inspector perceives a need for those bodies to have "recourse to the independence and critical and constructive spirit of experts recruited externally by the intergovernmental organs themselves" (para. 46). Elsewhere in his report, the Inspector has stated that such outside experts "speaking in a personal capacity and on their own responsibility, ... are not obliged at all costs to seek the neutrality which the fact of belonging to the Organization tends to impose" (para. 22). The Secretary-General fully recognizes the important contribution that outside experts are making and will continue to make to the work of the Organization. It should be emphasized that their role and that of the Secretariat are complementary. While further improvements in this direction can be made, the Secretariat is fully capable of undertaking critical

assessments and providing action-oriented recommendations, if so required by specific legislative mandates, and possesses the requisite objectivity and professional capacity to carry out fully its functions in response to the needs of intergovernmental bodies.

5. The Secretary-General has repeatedly emphasized the important role of the Secretariat in bringing issues and policy options to the attention of Member States. This is in line with the emphasis placed in General Assembly resolution 32/197 on the need for the Secretariat to prepare "concise and action-oriented recommendations" on development issues for consideration by the Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and to identify and bring to the attention of Governments "emerging economic and social issues of international concern". The Secretary-General has recently invited programme managers to give greater attention to the need to develop a wider and more systematic capacity for anticipating emerging issues in potential problem areas with a view to identifying possible courses of action to deal with such issues and problems. The Secretary-General has also drawn attention to the need to strengthen Secretariat support to Member States in intergovernmental negotiations and to devote more attention to both short- and long-term analysis of the interrelationship of international development issues and their impact at the national level.

6. The report also refers to what the Inspector perceives as a situation of "crisis" in the functioning of the Council. It should be pointed out, in this connection, that since 1952 the Council has continuously made efforts to improve its functioning and working methods in order to carry out the functions entrusted to it under the Charter, as well as by resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, in particular, resolution 32/197. Also, the situation cannot be regarded as "peculiar to the Council". It is, at least in part, a reflection in microcosm of the problems confronting the course of international economic relations and multilateral co-operation.

II. CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFINITION OF POLICIES

7. The Secretary-General concurs with the Inspector on the important contribution that the Economic and Social Council is required to make to the definition and formulation of economic and social policies (see A/39/281-E/1984/81, chap. I). In this connection, the report rightly emphasizes the importance of the general debate which corresponds to one of the essential functions entrusted to the Council by the Charter. According to the Inspector, the main weakness of the general debate is that it fails to result in a set of agreed recommendations on the world economic situation. The adoption of such recommendations, however desirable, is difficult, given the range and complexity of the issues that are addressed and the diversity of interests involved. The general debate provides a valuable opportunity for an exchange of views, a tour d'horizon among Member States in an attempt to make a shared assessment of the situation and the emerging problems. The Secretariat is capable of presenting action-oriented recommendations in support of the general debate and is prepared to do so if required by the Council.

8. There is no doubt that there is a need to continue efforts to identify priority issues for consideration by the Council. In 1983, the Council gave priority to the comprehensive review of operational activities of the United Nations system. During its second regular session of 1984, the Council will be according priority to the consideration of the critical economic situation in Africa.
9. The Inspector has stated, in paragraph 12 of his report that the documentation provided under agenda item 3 is too voluminous, too late, somewhat diverse, partially summarized, purely informative and lacking in recommendations, except in one case (the report of the Committee for Development Planning). It should be noted that, while documentation greatly influences the nature and quality of the deliberations and conclusions of intergovernmental bodies, reports cannot in themselves ensure the emergence of policy recommendations and conclusions. There are several obvious factors, including the complexity and sensitivity of certain substantive issues, which also determine the course of intergovernmental action. It is true, however, that a very large number of documents are issued for the general debate, some of which do not have a direct bearing on the world economic situation. This is an issue that requires further consideration by both the Council and the Secretariat in their efforts to rationalize and streamline documents.
10. The Secretary-General also fully agrees that there is an urgent need to ensure the timely availability of documentation, a matter that will be given priority attention within the Secretariat in order to rectify the prevailing unsatisfactory situation. While much of the responsibility rests with the Secretariat, there is also a need for delegations to exercise greater selectivity in requesting studies and reports, bearing in mind, where necessary, the limited time available between the conclusion of a General Assembly session and the commencement of the next session of the Economic and Social Council. Attention will also be given to improving the content of the provisional annotated agenda for the Council, by inter alia, identifying and annotating key issues for consideration.
11. The Secretary-General concurs with the Inspector on the need to improve further the quality and presentation of the World Economic Survey, while at the same time drawing attention to the progress that has been made in this direction in recent years. Some of the suggestions made by the Inspector have been incorporated in the Survey. The Secretary-General does not agree, however, that the Survey would better serve Member States if it were reduced essentially to a set of policy recommendations with some supporting commentary on the arguments for and against alternative courses of action. The purpose of the Survey, which has appeared annually since 1948 is to present an interpretation of the significance and consequences of current global events that is reasoned and consistent with the evidence. The other surveys and reports to which the Inspector makes reference are of much more recent vintage and view the world economy from different institutional perspectives, with emphasis on those aspects that directly affect the organization concerned in their operational activities. Through the universality of its geographical coverage, its concern with a broad range of current or emerging issues, and in its treatment of major economic issues in an interrelated and integrated manner, the Survey is geared to assisting the Council in making its comprehensive assessment of the world economy.

12. The Inspector advocates expanding the analytic sections and curtailing or even deleting the descriptive sections of documentation provided to the Council. While there is scope for deeper and more extensive analysis in many documents, the intellectual authority and technical credibility of such analysis rests to a considerable extent on the data and factual description of the objective trends on which it is based. The value of the Survey is precisely that it combines an appropriate amount of factual material with analysis.

13. The Secretary-General will examine ways and means of securing greater complementarity between macro-economic surveys undertaken within the United Nations, particularly between the World Economic Survey and the Trade and Development Report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. The recommendations regarding the Survey in relation to relevant reports of other international organizations will be further examined. This has not been possible within the limited time available.

14. The Secretary-General agrees with the emphasis placed by the Inspector on the contributions of the Committee for Development Planning. This is reinforced by the significance of the recommendations contained in the 1984 report of the newly constituted Committee. The Committee was established as an advisory body of the Economic and Social Council. Several suggestions made by the Inspector to strengthen the advisory role of the Committee either have been implemented already or are under consideration. In relation to the Council, the roles of the Committee and of the Secretariat are complementary. The Committee has regularly submitted its views on specific subjects when invited to do so by the Council or the General Assembly. The reporting role of the Secretariat is to assist the deliberations of intergovernmental bodies and expert groups, including the Committee for Development Planning, by providing, inter alia, background information and analysis on which they can formulate opinions. The World Economic Survey fulfils primarily informational and analytical functions and highlights issues, while the report of the Committee for Development Planning focuses on recommendations and policy issues. As in the past, the Secretariat will assist the Committee in engaging the services of consultants, as and when required.

III. THE FUNCTION OF CO-ORDINATING SYSTEM-WIDE PLANS AND PROGRAMMES

15. In chapter II of his report, the Inspector has correctly stressed the obvious relationship between the identification and study of major world programmes in the economic and social fields and the co-ordination of the United Nations system. In that connection, the Inspector has drawn attention to the limitations of the cross-organizational programme analyses and of the cross-organizational reviews of selected major sectors in the medium-term plans of the organizations of the United Nations system submitted to the Council in 1983.

16. The attempt to draw general conclusions in regard to issues of fundamental importance on the basis of an examination of a few selected documents may not always yield correct or fruitful results. Thus, for example, the Inspector is critical of the "essentially descriptive" nature of what are now called cross-organizational reviews of selected major sectors in the medium-term plans of

organizations of the United Nations system as they were submitted to the Council in 1983. Descriptive narratives have value in that they consolidate programme information on a system-wide basis. Account should also be taken of the severe time constraints under which the 1983 reviews were prepared. The follow-up to the cross-sectoral analysis in food and agriculture prepared for the tenth session of the World Food Council would seem to respond to many of the concerns expressed by the Inspector.

17. As for the cross-organizational programme analyses, the Inspector concludes, quite correctly, that, as of 1983, they had led to few recommendations on substance. The same conclusion was reached in a report of the Secretary-General to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its twenty-fourth session (E/AC.51/1984/3). That conclusion prompted a critical self-assessment by the organizations of the system in the context of discussing future cross-organizational programme analyses, and in 1984 an analysis of human settlements activities was presented to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination that went far beyond any previous programme analysis in providing the kind of critical appraisal of the state of programme co-ordination long sought by the Committee.

18. The Inspector has also noted that the Joint Meetings of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination had not served their intended purposes. In the recent past, there has been an improvement in the United Nations system situation through an effort to follow up on discussions at the Joint Meetings. This was particularly evident when, in response to the suggestions made at the eighteenth series of Joint Meetings in 1983, the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination undertook an examination of the support of the economic and technical co-operation among developing countries.

19. The Secretary-General fully concurs with the emphasis of the Inspector on the important role of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and will continue to assist in enhancing its effective functioning. For reasons stated earlier, the Secretary-General does not, however, agree that the recommendation of the Inspector to provide outside experts to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination to examine the problem of co-ordination will serve a useful purpose. Should any external assistance be required, the Joint Inspection Unit could be requested to provide valuable support.

20. The Inspector has also recommended that recourse to outside expertise by the Council and the General Assembly, with the assistance of subsidiary bodies such as the Committee for Development Planning and the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination, must be "organized and financed by transferring part of the credits for consultants currently assigned to the Secretariat" (para. 66). In keeping with his function as the chief administrative officer of the Organization under Article 97 of the Charter of the United Nations and with his power of appointment under Article 101 it is for the Secretary-General to manage the personnel and financial resources of the Organization. He is the authority responsible for entering into contractual arrangements on behalf of the United Nations. It is important to preserve the function of the Secretary-General vis-à-vis the General

Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. The Secretary-General would, of course, respond to requests from the Assembly and the Council for specific consultants on a priority basis, and he would make every effort to obtain for them the personnel resources that might be required.

IV. THE FUNCTION OF PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING IN THE UNITED NATIONS

21. The Secretary-General fully concurs with the emphasis of the Inspector on the important role of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and will continue to assist in enhancing its effective functioning (see A/39/281-E/1984/81, chap. III). Programme planning documents are the principal tools available to Member States in guiding the activities of the Organization and to the Secretariat in improving the design of programmes and ensuring their effective monitoring and implementation. The Secretary-General shares the view of the Inspector that the programming instruments, such as the medium-term plan and the programme budget, should be given wider distribution to the subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council. Chapter III of the report may exaggerate the deficiencies of current practice, since quite a few subsidiary bodies do receive the relevant parts of the medium-term plan and the programme budget. The Inspector has referred to the Committee on Natural Resources by way of illustration. That Committee has tended to view itself as a technical committee of the Council and has been reluctant to review medium-term plans, programme budgets or performance reports. Thus, there is a need for all the substantive subsidiary bodies of the Council to understand their roles in programming and co-ordination of the activities of the United Nations system in their respective sectors and to be prepared to take decisions on the basis of the information placed before them. Improving the quality of documentation may be a necessary condition for more effective governmental decision-making in this area, but it is not a sufficient condition. The committees themselves must be prepared and willing to exercise their mandates in programming and co-ordination. It would seem beneficial and necessary to have the substantive sub-committees of the Council that possess sectoral expertise take more affirmative action in this function. This possibility needs further examination.

22. Some of the specific recommendations in chapter III of the report particularly those relating to the continuous improvement of various planning, programming and evaluation instruments (recommendation 10), the formulation of recommendations (recommendation 12) and a precise calendar for the production and distribution of documents (recommendations 8 and 9), require careful consideration by the Secretariat units concerned with programming and planning, as well as by the Programming, Planning and Budgeting Board.