

UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL
ASSEMBLY



Distr.
GENERAL

A/3739
12 December 1957

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Twelfth session
Agenda item 41

BUDGET ESTIMATES FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 1958

Control and limitation of documentation

Report of the Fifth Committee

Rapporteur: Mr. Jaime de PINIES (Spain)

1. The Fifth Committee studied at its 616th, 617th, 622nd, 623rd and 624th meetings the problem of curtailing the volume of United Nations documentation,^{1/} in relation both to the total output of material and to the length of individual documents.

2. At the 616th meeting the representative of the United Kingdom offered the following draft resolution (A/C.5/L.473):

The General Assembly,

Bearing in mind the present very considerable output of paper documents by the United Nations,

Noting paragraph 57 of the foreword by the Secretary-General to the budget estimates for 1958 (A/3600),

Commending the Secretary-General for his efforts to present Secretariat documents as concisely as possible, and in setting, as a target figure, a reduction in length of 25 per cent,

1. Requests the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to reduce the amount of documentation produced by the Secretariat during 1958;

2. Suggests for this purpose the figure of 25 per cent below the 1957 level for the over-all output of such documentation;

^{1/} The Fifth Committee's discussion of the 1958 estimates as a whole (607th to 611th meetings) included preliminary and general arguments on this problem. These were, however, restated in connexion with specific proposals presented at the 616th and 617th meetings.

3. Invites the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly before the beginning of its thirteenth session on the nature and extent of the reductions achieved.

3. The representative of the United Kingdom reminded the Committee that Member States had long been disturbed by continuing increases in the output of United Nations material, which, among other consequences, made it difficult for delegations to give more than cursory attention to certain of the documents prepared at high cost. That was not, however the whole problem. Most United Nations documents could be more concise. While many staff members admittedly had to draft in other than their mother tongue, a more serious cause of prolixity was the United Nations style of drafting, which called for a historical review of the question at issue, coupled with extracts from earlier documents and other relevant, but perhaps not indispensable, information. For 1958, the United Kingdom proposal (A/C.5/L.473) contemplated a decrease of 25 per cent (compared with 1957) in the amount of documentation to be produced by the Secretariat. The Secretary-General had himself set the example (cited in paragraph 57 of his foreword to the 1958 estimates (A/3600)) by fixing, as a target for 1957, a 25 per cent reduction in the length of documents drafted under the responsibility of the Secretariat. The draft resolution offered only a partial solution, and it would still be necessary for Member States to exercise restraint in requesting reports and studies.

4. The representative of the United Kingdom accepted the suggestion of the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions that in order to cover the two categories of documents published by the United Nations - produced respectively by the Secretariat and by United Nations bodies - paragraph 1 of the draft resolution should be amended to read:

"1. Requests the Secretary-General to continue his efforts, in co-operation with Member States, to reduce the amount of documentation produced during 1958;"

5. Representatives of the Secretary-General made the following points:
(a) A reduction of 25 per cent in 1958 was too heavy; when added to the 25 per cent set as a target for 1957, it made a total reduction, by comparison with 1956, of almost 50 per cent for the documentation produced by the Secretariat. Furthermore, the amendment suggested by

the Chairman of the Advisory Committee to paragraph 1 of the draft resolution broadened the term "such documentation" in paragraph 2 to cover all United Nations documentation and not merely that coming within the direct control of the Secretariat;

(b) The number or length of many documents was not within the Secretary-General's control, and in other cases his discretion was narrow; an undue compression of material would be unacceptable to the Councils, and might also result in the exclusion of necessary information;

(c) Past efforts to stem the flow of documents had not been without result, and the Secretariat was continuously striving both to reduce the volume of material and to improve the quality of texts.

6. Most delegations gave full support to the aims of the draft resolution; their attainment would lighten the administrative burden of Member Governments and their representatives, lead to an appreciable economy, and enhance the quality of United Nations documentation.

7. Certain of the proposed provisions were, however, queried:

(a) Practical difficulties stood in the way of a percentage reduction: no two years were strictly comparable; exceptional circumstances - for example, the holding of two major ad hoc conferences in 1958 - caused wide variations in annual output; other factors of increase were the expansion in the membership of the United Nations and in the number of meetings;

(b) However desirable in principle, an over-all reduction of 25 per cent (necessitating in some cases a still higher cut) was of an arbitrary character. It might therefore be wiser merely to request the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to reduce the amount of documentation. If, however, it were decided to set a percentage figure, the Secretary-General should at least be given specific directives, perhaps to be drafted by a committee of Member States which, after consulting in 1958 with the Secretariat, would report to the General Assembly at its next session. Alternatively, the task might be entrusted to the Advisory Committee;

/...

2/ Concerning the public information activities of the United Nations (A/C.5/L.477)
3/ The two versions amounted respectively to 255 and 450 lines of mimeographed (English) text.

/...

(c) It seemed irrational to recommend a decrease in relation to a _____

A comprehensive report was of particular assistance to the smaller delegations, whose members, having in certain cases to attend more than one Main Committee, were called upon to master the details of a wide range of subjects.

16. Conversely, delegations favouring an abridged form of report cited the difficulty for the Rapporteur of interpreting accurately, even within the compass of the traditional report, a variety of attitudes and opinions or of giving a balanced account of an intricate discussion. The summary records were the only adequate source of information, and where such records were kept, a shorter Rapporteur's report was preferable, and would relieve the pressure under which the Rapporteur and the Secretariat had to work during an Assembly session. Such a report would moreover set a valuable example to other committees. Finally, an abridged version, by decreasing the volume of official reading matter, represented an economy of time and effort both for Government departments and for delegations, as well as a measurable, if incidental, monetary saving for the Organization.

17. There was widespread support, at the concluding stage of the discussion, for the following propositions: (a) as regards the volume of documentation, it was not possible in a deliberative organization like the United Nations to set an exact and predetermined figure of reduction; (b) as the drafting of reports came within the exclusive competence of the Rapporteur, no attempt should be made to write a rule governing the nature or length of draft texts; the Rapporteur, whether in the Fifth Committee or in other committees of the General Assembly, would doubtless apply whatever criteria were best suited, in his judgement, to a particular item or, more generally, to the work of his committee; (c) all Rapporteurs might nevertheless be requested to set, as standards for their reports, adequacy and balance rather than length or brevity; and (d) efforts should be made, through the medium of concise drafting, to achieve any financial savings that were consistent with a balanced and adequate presentation of fact and opinion.

18. In general, the Fifth Committee was satisfied that the recommended reduction in the volume of documentation would not hamper the efficient conduct of business in any United Nations body.

ANNEX

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

The General Assembly,

Bearing in mind the present very considerable output of United Nations documents,

Noting paragraph 57 of the Secretary-General's foreword to the budget estimates for 1958 (A/3600),

Commending the Secretary-General for his efforts to present Secretariat documents as concisely as possible, and in setting, as a target figure, a reduction in length of 25 per cent,

1. Requests the Secretary-General to continue his efforts, in co-operation with Member States, to reduce the length and amount of documentation produced during 1958;

2. Suggests for this purpose the target figure of 25 per cent below the 1957 level for the over-all output of such documentation;

3. Decides to establish a committee (composed of representatives serving at Headquarters, New York) of the following Member States: Argentina, Canada, China, France, Iraq, Mexico, Pakistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The function of the committee shall be to consult with and advise the Secretary-General on the most effective means of implementing the present resolution, and to report and make recommendations to the General Assembly at its thirteenth session concerning methods of achieving reductions in the over-all output of documentation;

4. Invites the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly before the opening of its thirteenth session on the steps taken and on the nature and extent of the reductions achieved.
