

UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL
ASSEMBLY



Distr.
GENERAL

A/5647
9 December 1963

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Eighteenth session
Agenda item 60

REVIEW OF THE PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Thirty-fourth report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions to the General Assembly at its eighteenth session

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the review of the pattern of conferences (A/5638), which brings up to date a report he had submitted last year (A/5317) and in which he reviewed the growth in the annual programme of conferences and the effectiveness of the provisions of General Assembly resolution 1202 (XII) of 13 December 1957.
2. Under the terms of that resolution, principles were established to govern the planning and financing of meetings and conferences of the United Nations for the period 1958 to 1962 in order that the most rational and economical use might be made of the resources of the Organization and to provide for the effective participation of Member States. Under operative paragraph 2 of the resolution, the Assembly decided that, as a general principle, meetings of United Nations bodies should be held at the established headquarters of the bodies concerned and under sub-paragraphs (a) and (e) thereof provided for certain specific exceptions to this general principle.
3. The Secretary-General indicated in his report of last year that no difficulty had been encountered in the implementation of paragraph 2 of the resolution and, further, that paragraphs 3 and 4 thereof had facilitated the administration of the conference programme as a whole. The Secretary-General, while maintaining this view, believes that some changes to the present pattern of conferences might well be necessary in the future to provide, inter alia, for other functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council to meet at Geneva in the latter part of the year (the present pattern provides for only one functional commission, in addition to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, to meet at Geneva annually). In this

connexion, the Advisory Committee was given to understand that this suggestion would apply to organs of a technical character, such as the Statistical Commission and the Population Commission, the servicing of which would not require the presence in Geneva of substantive personnel needed for the regular session of the General Assembly in New York. The Committee was informed that the holding of such sessions in Geneva during the last quarter of the year would, by spreading out the calendar of meetings, make possible a more rational utilization of the conference staff of the European Office where there would usually appear to be at that time a relative lull in conference activity.

4. The Secretary-General recalls that, at its seventeenth session, the General Assembly, by resolution 1851 (XVII), decided to extend for one more year the pattern established by its resolution 1202 (XII) subject to some minor amendments which had been proposed by the Secretary-General and endorsed by the Advisory Committee. It further invited the Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the competent organs the importance and urgency of the measures outlined in paragraph 11 of his report (A/5317), as well as the need for moderation on their part in fixing their programmes of meetings at Headquarters for 1964, in view of the major reconstruction work to be carried out at that location.

5. In paragraph 4 of his current report (A/5638), the Secretary-General indicates that, in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 1851 (XVII), he took several measures during the course of 1963, designed to secure a more rational programme of meetings and to meet the requirements of the resolution in question. In paragraphs 5 to 12 of his report, the Secretary-General recounts the steps he took and the response which his appeals elicited.

6. He indicates, inter alia, that even though, at its thirty-fifth session in April 1963, the ECOSOC adopted resolution 936 (XXXV) requesting its commission and committees to review the number and timing of their meetings with a view to eliminating all those which were not essential and to reduce the frequency of others in accordance with the principles set forth in its resolution 693 B (XXVI) paragraphs 3 and 4 (inter alia that, as a general rule, a biennial pattern of meetings should be adopted by the functional commissions), two of the three functional commissions which met between the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth sessions

of the Council expressed the view that they ought to meet annually, while the third stated that it might usefully hold a session in 1964. Two other functional commissions which met in 1963 before the adoption of Economic and Social Council resolution 936 (XXXV) recommended annual sessions for themselves.

7. At its 1963 summer session, the Advisory Committee, following its review of the initial budget estimates submitted by the Secretary-General for the financial year 1964 and pursuant to General Assembly resolution 1797 (XVII), made extensive observations concerning the need to rationalize the programme of conferences and further made these observations available to the Economic and Social Council for its consideration at its thirty-sixth session.^{1/} These observations were made in the knowledge of the response of the functional commissions to requests that they review their schedule of meetings with a view to reduction (see paragraph 6 above).

8. At its thirty-sixth session in July 1963, the Council decided that there should be no sessions of the functional commissions in 1964 other than the Commission on Narcotic Drugs which would meet for one week only in order to attend to urgent business relating to various international conventions. It further decided to limit its main meetings in 1964 to only one session of five weeks in the summer at Geneva instead of the usual practice of holding a spring and a summer session.

9. In paragraph 12 of his report (A/5638), the Secretary-General states that the Council's decisions have made it possible for him to prepare a total conference programme for Headquarters and Geneva for 1964 which includes two major special conferences and which can be accommodated within the reduced number of conference rooms available and serviced with the maximum utilization of existing staff resources of the Secretariat. The Advisory Committee would call particular attention to the fact that, in the view of the Secretary-General, "this total conference programme as contained in annex III of [the Secretary-General's] report and as proposed for approval by the General Assembly must be strictly adhered to

^{1/} These observations were transmitted to the Council in document E/3801. They are reproduced in full in paragraphs 52 to 74 of the Advisory Committee's fifth report to the General Assembly at its eighteenth session (Official Records of the General Assembly, Eighteenth Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/5507)).

in view of the special circumstances obtaining in 1964". The Secretary-General hopes that the Council will take full advantage of the opportunity afforded by the reduced activity next year to consider carefully its calendar and pattern of conferences for 1965 and future years; he believes that, quite aside from the special situation in 1964, there is an urgent need to pursue measures for the rationalization of the total annual conference programme as already called for by the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. In this regard he fully concurs with the observations of the Advisory Committee as contained in paragraphs 52 to 74 of its fifth report to the General Assembly at its eighteenth session.^{2/}

10. Under these circumstances the Secretary-General suggests that the General Assembly postpone a further review of the annual pattern of meetings until its nineteenth session when any decisions which might be taken by the Economic and Social Council during the course of 1964 could be made known. Pending detailed consideration at its nineteenth session of the outcome of the Council's thirty-seventh session, the General Assembly would also need to continue for one more year, until 31 December 1964, the pattern of conferences established in resolution 1202 (XII), with the amendments made in resolution 1851 (XVII).

11. There are, however, in the opinion of the Secretary-General, a number of steps which the General Assembly might usefully take at its present session. He suggests that:

- (a) The General Assembly request the Economic and Social Council to give full consideration to certain guiding principles for the formulation of its calendar of meetings for 1965 and future years and, in particular, to consider both the desirability and feasibility of advancing its present spring session to January; such an advancement might provide the following advantages:

- (i) It would afford the Council an opportunity to review the total work programme in the economic and social fields as it has emerged from the deliberations of the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly, against the resources appropriated by the General Assembly for that year;
 - (ii) It would also provide the Council with the opportunity of considering the reports of such of its functional commissions and committees as might meet concurrently with the regular session of the General Assembly in the fall of the previous year at Geneva;
 - (iii) Finally, a session of the Council in January might make it possible to eliminate the resumed summer session which is largely a procedural one and which is held normally in late December. It would also have the effect of relieving the heavier concentration of meetings which occurs during the period March to July annually;
- (b) The General Assembly request the Council to undertake a study of the optimum frequency for the sessions of its functional commissions, committees and other subsidiary bodies as well as the possibility of either integrating or eliminating such of the subsidiary bodies whose terms of reference might overlap;
- (c) The General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide the Council with a report on the administrative and budgetary consequences of any changes in the Council's calendar or pattern of meetings along the lines indicated in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b) of this paragraph as well as in paragraph 3 above, so that the Council's study of these broader issues might take these aspects into account. Following the adoption by the General Assembly, on 5 December 1963, the resolution 1922 (XVIII), the Council will in any case need to reconsider at its resumed thirty-sixth session this year, its previous decision not to include a session of the Commission on Human Rights in 1964.

12. In paragraph 15 of his report, the Secretary-General discusses the situation as regards the programme of meetings of the other principal organs, and their subsidiary bodies. While he expects that the recommendations of the Ad Hoc

Committee on the Improvement of the Methods of Work of the General Assembly, which were approved by resolution 1898 (XVIII) of 11 November 1963, will lead to some reduction in the number of meetings and duration of the regular General Assembly sessions, he points out that there remains the question of the programme of meetings of the subsidiary bodies established by the General Assembly and the Trusteeship Council, and the extent to which any rationalization of their meetings programmes can be attempted rests principally with the Member States themselves.

13. Finally, it is the view of the Secretary-General that, in considering the question of containing the totality of the meetings in the conference programme, account must be taken of major special conferences convened under the auspices of the United Nations. Annex II of his report contains a list of the special conferences³ that have been held from 1958 to date and illustrates clearly their growth in number and frequency. The Secretary-General strongly urges that, as a general rule and until it has been possible to rationalize the normal annual programme of United Nations meetings, no more than one major special conference be scheduled annually.

Observations and recommendations of the Advisory Committee

14. In paragraphs 52 to 74 of its fifth report to the General Assembly at its eighteenth session^{3/}, the Advisory Committee set forth in detail the reasons why it considers necessary and urgent a rationalization of the Organization's programme of conferences and meetings. Paragraphs 55 to 62 of that report give a summary of the action taken by the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Advisory Committee and the Secretary-General to give practical effect to the principles laid down by the General Assembly in resolution 1202 (XII) of 13 December 1957 "in order that the most rational use might be made of the resources of the Organization and the effective participation of Members facilitated."^{4/} In paragraph 62 of its report, the Advisory Committee noted with regret that, despite repeated exhortations over the past five years urging rationalizations and restraint, the practical results were less than encouraging.

^{3/} Ibid.

^{4/} Ibid., para. 55.

15. It is clear that the restrictive influences which might have resulted from the application of operative paragraphs 4 and 5 of resolution 1202 (XII) have not made themselves felt to the extent expected. It should be noted, for example, that over the past five years, the total number of meetings serviced by the Secretariat in New York and in Geneva has increased from 2,711 in 1959 to 4,231 in 1962.^{5/} This is attributable, in the main to:

(a) The establishment by the General Assembly of a considerable number of subsidiary bodies to undertake specific tasks;

(b) The expansion of activities in the economic and social fields which has resulted in an increase in the number of standing and ad hoc committees, groups of experts, international commodity conferences and meetings related to technical assistance activities;

(c) The convening, each year, of a number of large special conferences.

16. The time has now come when the total demands for servicing conferences and meetings exceed the resources which can be placed at the disposal of the Secretary-General. The availability of funds is not the sole determining factor when it is proposed to hold a meeting; competing demands on a limited supply of qualified staff make some form of "rationing" unavoidable. The Advisory Committee firmly believes that "only if decision-making bodies are prepared to take a rational approach to future programmes, exercising the utmost restraint and making sacrifices where necessary, will meetings and conferences continue to be fully effective within the Organization's over-all activities. It is, indeed, essential that they ensure that the available resources are directed to a carefully elaborated programme of priorities rather than being dispersed over an ever-expanding ad hoc schedule of meetings, the preparation for which, both by the Secretariat and by Member Governments, would be inadequate, the servicing of which would be unsatisfactory, and the effectiveness incommensurate with the efforts deployed and the costs incurred".^{6/}

^{5/} These figures include meetings serviced outside the pattern laid down by resolution 1202 (XII) which have increased from approximately 600 in 1959 to 1,200 in 1962.

^{6/} Official Records of the General Assembly, Eighteenth Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/5507), para. 72.

17. Despite the welcome action of the Economic and Social Council in reducing its programme of meetings for 1964, and the assurance given by the Secretary-General^{7/} that he can accommodate and service the total 1964 programme, the Advisory Committee would still doubt whether all of the meetings should be held in that year, whether they can be adequately prepared, or whether they will all produce results commensurate with the efforts and expenditure devoted to them.

18. While concurring in the suggestion of the Secretary-General that a further review of the pattern of conferences be postponed until the nineteenth session of the General Assembly, the Advisory Committee wishes it to be understood that this does not mean that it considers the rationalization of the conference programme less urgent than hitherto. It believes, however, that there would be some advantage if the next review were undertaken at a time when all material facilities will again be available and when needs arising out of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development are known. The Committee recommends most strongly that this matter be given high priority by the General Assembly.

19. The Advisory Committee endorses the Secretary-General's proposals concerning the Economic and Social Council contained in paragraph 13 of his report. It would, however, suggest that at the same time as the Council considers advancing its spring session to January, it should also look into the possibility of bringing forward its summer session in order that its programme of activities for the following year might be included in the budget estimates for that year. The Committee would recall that it made such a recommendation in its fifth report to the General Assembly at its eighteenth session.^{8/}

20. As regards the Secretary-General's suggestion that the General Assembly might request the Economic and Social Council to undertake a study of the optimum frequency for the sessions of its functional commissions, committees and other subsidiary bodies as well as the possibility of either integrating or eliminating such of the subsidiary bodies whose terms of reference might overlap, the Advisory Committee considers that such a study would be of the utmost importance to the General Assembly when it reviews the pattern of conferences at its nineteenth

^{7/} A/5638, para. 12.

^{8/} Official Records of the General Assembly, Eighteenth Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/5507), para. 51.

session. It should be understood however that the object of the study would be to present the Council's proposals for the rationalization of meetings in the economic and social fields and not merely a statement of the individual views of each of its subsidiary bodies. The Advisory Committee does not believe that the existing frequency of meetings is necessarily conducive to effectiveness in the formulation or implementation of work programmes in the case of all the Council bodies. Well-established programmes do not call for, indeed are likely to be more productive without, annual review by policy-making bodies, and the Advisory Committee would again venture to suggest that for them, a biennial pattern of meetings would be appropriate. In this connexion, the Committee would recall that the Economic Commission for Latin America functions in a most effective manner with a biennial session.

21. The Advisory Committee agrees that the Secretary-General should be requested to provide the Council with such information of an administrative and budgetary nature as may assist in rationalizing its over-all programme of meetings.

22. Finally, the Advisory Committee wishes to support most strongly the Secretary-General's recommendation that, as a general rule, and until it has been possible to rationalize the regular annual programme of meetings, no more than one major special conference be scheduled annually.

23. To sum up, subject to the observations made in the preceding paragraphs, the Advisory Committee:

(a) Concurs in the Secretary-General's proposal that the General Assembly postpone a further review of the pattern of conferences until its nineteenth session, and that it accordingly continue until 31 December 1964, the pattern of conferences established in resolution 1202 (XII), with the amendments made in resolution 1851 (XVII);

(b) Recommends that the General Assembly request the Economic and Social Council:

- (i) To advance its "spring" session to January and consider the possibility of advancing its summer session to May or early June;
- (ii) To undertake in 1964 a study of the optimum frequency for the sessions of its functional commissions, committees and other subsidiary bodies as well as the possibility of either integrating or eliminating such of the subsidiary bodies whose terms of

reference might overlap, so that the conclusions of the Council might be available to the General Assembly at its nineteenth session;

(c) Recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide the Council with such information of an administrative and budgetary nature as may assist the Council in performing the above study;

(d) Recommends that, as a general rule, and at least until it has been possible to rationalize the regular annual programme of meetings, no more than one major special conference should be scheduled annually.
