

UNEP Comments to Secretary-General's Report on ECOSOC Reform

1. The Rio+20 outcome has approached the ECOSOC role in a very general way, in its §§ 82 and 83, basically reaffirming ECOSOC's central coordinate role, expressing a 'commitment to strengthen ECOSOC within its mandate', plus only 'looking forward' to the result of the review already asked by 61/16 five years ago. It is important to stress that the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation dealt with the same subject in a very detailed manner in its famous § 144, that took dozens of hours of negotiation. The recommendations in it (copied below) remain fully valid; they might just have to be refreshed politically by revisiting and recalling them. They were not revisited by Rio not because of a sudden new disagreement on it, but by lack of time.

§ 144: ... the Council should:

(a) Increase its role in overseeing system-wide coordination and the balanced integration of economic, social and environmental aspects of United Nations policies and programs aimed at promoting sustainable development;

(b) Organize periodic consideration of sustainable development themes in regard to the implementation of Agenda 21, including the means of implementation. Recommendations in regard to such themes could be made by the Commission on Sustainable Development;

(c) Make full use of its high-level, coordination, operational activities and the general segments to effectively take into account all relevant aspects of the work of the United Nations on sustainable development. In this context, the Council should encourage the active participation of major groups in its high-level segment and the work of its relevant functional commissions, in accordance with the respective rules of procedure;

(d) Promote greater coordination, complementarity, effectiveness and efficiency of activities of its functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies that are relevant to the implementation of Agenda 21;

(e) Terminate the work of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources for Development and transfer its work to the Commission on Sustainable Development;

(f) Ensure that there is a close link between the role of the Council in the follow-up to the Summit and its role in the follow-up to the Monterrey Consensus, in a sustained and coordinated manner. To that end, the Council should explore ways to develop arrangements relating to its meetings with the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization, as set out in the Monterrey Consensus;

They contain, especially point c, ingredients that are useful in answering the exercise now and that fit under the questions 1 and 3 of the guidance note attached to the request of the SG. Many people have forgotten the existence of this agreed text of 2002.

Taking into account that as a UN Charter organ, ECOSOC can only be reformed in terms of organization of work, we would like to suggest the following:

- ECOSOC reform should provide coherence among its diverse commissions and committees which are relevant to sustainable development.
 - Provide in its high level segment for a session involving presidents/chairs of UN governing bodies of relevant sustainable development agencies, funds and programmes to discuss interlinked sustainable development issues.
 - Provide for consideration of emerging issues of global significance in terms of sustainable development.
 - Add environment as a separate agenda item. While in the past, ECOSOC considered international cooperation on environmental matters, it does not have a specific agenda item on environment and only takes note of the UNEP Governing Council report. It should do more than that. It is important to note that reference to coordinated follow-up to the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields" in both the Rio +20 outcome and the ECOSOC resolution that was attached is not new. ECOSOC has always considered environmental issues, for example, in 1968 it adopted a resolution providing for the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.
 - Follow-up on interlinked implementation of sustainable development goals and also findings of major assessment reports such as GEO, HDR, WDR etc.
2. It is striking to see in the SG's letter, in the attached guidance note, and in the resolution L 32, the total absence of any allusion to the High Level forum on Sustainable Development, the principle of which is solid as per § 84 – 86 of Rio. One was clearly afraid from pre-empting a process that is still to start, as foreseen in § 86 of Rio.
3. Compared to other multilateral organizations such as the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria or the FAO's Committee on World Food Security, possibilities of civil society engagement with ECOSOC are limited. In order to respond to resolution E/2012/L32 and to strengthen its role in the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits, it is suggested that the Council improves mechanisms for civil society involvement in its work. Options for this include:
- Simplify and accelerate the accreditation process
 - Establish a permanent civil society body (e.g. civil society advisory board)
 - Develop and implement an information disclosure policy
 - Establish new guidelines for civil society engagement that reflect best practices in multilateral organizations and replacing resolution 1996/31

Currently, approximately 3,800 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are in general or special consultative status with the Council which is granted upon recommendation of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs comprised of 19 Member States. With the Committee meeting only twice a year to decide on which NGOs applying for consultative status will recommend to the ECOSOC Council, the application process is rather long. It is therefore suggested to introduce additional sessions of the Committee on NGOs in order to accelerate this process.

The participation in ECOSOC meetings of CSOs in consultative status or on the roster is limited to the attendance of meetings, the submission of written statements and the making of oral statements on recommendation of the NGO Committee and if approved by the Council. In order to increase civil society engagement in the work of the Council, it could set up a consultative body comprised of civil society representatives elected from the group of organizations in consultative status. While establishing this body it is suggested that the Council applies a Major Groups+ approach in order to ensure all relevant groups of civil society are included in the process. Representatives elected to this body should be involved in agenda-setting, receive all working documents of the Council in a timely manner and automatically have the right to address the Council.

In the absence of a general public information policy at the United Nations, the Council should furthermore develop and implement an information disclosure policy as it has been done by other multilateral organizations such as the World Bank or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This policy should grant civil society timely access to all relevant documents. In case information of relevance to the public is not disclosed, there should be a possibility of appeal through an official body/mechanism which is able to process appeals in a timely and comprehensible manner.

Finally, the Council lacks guidelines on civil society engagement clearly regulating all aspects of the involvement of CSOs in the work of the Council.