



The President  
of the  
Economic and Social Council

New York, September 10, 2003

FROM: GERT ROSENTHAL, PRESIDENT, ECOSOC  
TO: ALL MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL  
RE: PROPOSAL TO STRENGTHEN THE ROLE OF ECOSOC

1. Many of us recently returned from what I thought was a successful substantive session of the Economic and Social Council. Although I have been associated with the United Nations in different capacities for some time, I had never had the opportunity to participate in the full, four-week session. For me it was, among other aspects, a learning experience. As I stated in my closing remarks on July 26, I wanted to share some of my thoughts with my colleagues of the Bureau, and, subsequently, with all the members of ECOSOC. I now have had the opportunity to discuss this Memorandum with my colleagues of the Bureau. While not all members endorse my recommendations – these are, after all, my personal reflections – they did agree that I should share the Memorandum with the wider membership of the Council to provoke a debate on the issues raised.
2. I should make it clear that the following paragraphs fall more in the category of “lessons learned” from our Geneva meeting than reflecting any pretension of revisiting the broader subject of ECOSOC reform, which has been on our agenda for quite some time,<sup>1</sup> and which even was the main theme of our coordination segment during the 2002 session.<sup>2</sup>
3. My overall assessment of the Geneva meeting can be summarized in one, central, paradox. On the one hand, the meeting was too long to keep our undivided attention and motivation during the full four weeks of its duration. On the other hand, it was too short to do justice to each and every item on our agenda. In my view, this paradox is due to the fact that the Council historically concentrates the bulk of its substantive activities in one, relatively long but uninterrupted session.
4. My segment-by-segment assessment is as follows:
  - First, I was quite pleased with the format, content, level of representation and output of the policy dialogue of the first day, and especially with the high level segment.
  - I would say the same regarding the humanitarian segment and the operational activities segment, both of which seem to be taking on an increasingly significant substantive roles. The panels were interesting; a dialogue – albeit, insufficient – was generated, and output documents were meaningful.
  - I also believe that the coordination segment served its purpose, by building on the

<sup>1</sup> See, among others: Restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields (A/56/77-E/2001/69, 17 May 2001); Strengthening further the Economic and Social Council, building on its recent achievements, to help it fulfill the role ascribed to it in the Charter of the United Nations as contained in the Millennium Declaration (E/2002/62 of 10 May 2002); The role of the Economic and Social Council in the integrated and coordinated implementation of the outcomes of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits (E/2003/67 of 15 May, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See: E/2002/L.35 of 26 July, 2002. Strengthening further the Economic and Social Council...

very recently approved resolution 57/270B of the General Assembly (23 June, 2003) on integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields.

- Second, although the outcome of the general segment was also broadly satisfactory, the format proved to be more difficult, and, in my judgment, fell short of ECOSOC's unique role as the central mechanism for oversight and guidance of the activities of its subsidiary bodies.
5. I attribute the later to three circumstances.
- First, the intrinsically difficult and sometimes controversial nature of some of the matters covered during this segment (mostly associated with the Commission on Human Rights).
  - Second, the fact that the segment begins after delegates have already been at work for a period of almost three weeks, when a certain amount of fatigue is setting in. In fact, this year, when the meeting was held in Geneva, quite a few delegates returned to New York after two or three weeks, leaving the representation of their respective countries to their Geneva-based colleagues.
  - Third and most importantly, five to six working days do not appear to be enough to accommodate serious consideration and discussion of the large and diverse range of topics that usually crowd the agenda of this segment, which is basically concerned with the management aspects of our subsidiary bodies. Thus, in spite of the fact that a relatively thorough review of the work of the functional commissions did take place during informal consultations, the impression that stayed with most delegates after the formal sessions was one of a perfunctory and sometimes disjointed debate and a ritualistic taking note of reports. Organizing the debate around thematic clusters, which proved to be confusing at times, compounded this impression.
6. I was therefore left with the sense that, in spite of our best efforts, we did not do full justice to our oversight and management role regarding our subsidiary bodies. Further, for some of the subjects at hand, and as has happened in previous years, we did not have time to study the documentation, when the end of the sessions of some functional commissions did not allow for opportune processing of the reports in all languages.
7. As already pointed out, how to deal with the central paradox enunciated above has been the subject of discussion for some time. Among the ideas that have been debated, the following appear to have some merit:
- Linking the coordination segment back to back with the high-level part and selecting one theme for both these segments in order to enable the Council to address both the policy and system-wide coordination aspects of the theme.
  - Holding the operational activities segment and the humanitarian segment at a higher level of representation, but on a biennial basis, each separately in alternate years. An alternative proposal has been to hold a shortened, regular part of the operational activities segment annually to focus on the follow-up to the Comprehensive Triennial Policy Review and management issues, and hold a biennial high-level special operational activities segment which would focus on specific policy issues.
  - Separating the different segments over time. Some suggestions focus on a separate high-level segment; others on separating either the operational activities

or the humanitarian segment, or both.

8. I believe that all of these proposals merit further consideration.<sup>3</sup> But, at the very least, my own conclusions from our 2003 substantive session lead me to suggest two separate avenues to further enhance and strengthen the work of the Council.
  - The first falls in the category of working procedures, and refers to re-grouping or streamlining the agenda between the different segments, to better reflect the different functions of the Council. The main thrust of this re-grouping would be to limit the items of what is now called the General Segment to the oversight or management functions of the Council over its subsidiary bodies.
  - The second refers to extending the Council's substantive activities over a longer time-span. There does not seem to be a compelling reason to address all the segments in a single four-week sitting. One could phase the segments during the year so as to maximize the Council's capacity to prepare for its work and deliver timely responses and outputs. My own preference, based on our experience in Geneva (and which is not exclusive of the mentioned alternatives), would be to treat the general segment separately. I would like to elaborate a bit further on this last possibility.
9. The fact that some of our subsidiary bodies meet rather late in the first semester of the year constitutes a first justification for delaying the consideration of the general segment, which, among other aspects, examines the reports of those bodies. Thus, one possibility would be to hold the policy dialogue, the high-level, coordination, operational activities for development and humanitarian segments (the latter, possibly on a biennial basis), following the usual pattern of preparatory activities (presumably, in April and May), in the period between mid-June and mid-July. The experience of the last few years suggests that roughly three working days is enough for each of these segments, which adds up to approximately two and a half weeks if all four segments are conducted sequentially.
10. Then, after a brief break, the general segment, with some adjustments in its thematic content, could be held towards the end of July, or even in the Fall, taking care not to overlap with other meetings in the economic and social sphere. This part would be limited to all matters related to oversight of subsidiary bodies (except for the Executive Boards of the operational bodies, which fit more conveniently into the coordination segment) and could cover, say, seven to eight working days.
11. I believe that the integrity of the substantive session would not suffer from the proposed two-phase approach; in fact, it would probably be reinforced. This is so, because from the conceptual point of view, we need to give further content to the notion that ECOSOC provides real substantive and managerial oversight, as well as policy guidance to its subsidiary bodies. This means that ECOSOC should dedicate a bit more time and attention than it does at present to interacting with these bodies, assimilate their reports, and try to offer a coherent framework which would shape their future work programmes.
12. There are, in my view, several advantages to the above proposal.
  - As already suggested, the Council could give its undivided attention to each of its classical roles in the economic and social areas during the high-level, coordination and operational segments: first, to develop policy and strategies, as well as identify emerging development issues, in the context of ECOSOC as a development forum;

---

<sup>3</sup>. A compendium of these ideas can be found in a "Non-paper" prepared by the outgoing Bureau of 2000 for the incoming Bureau of 2001. The "non-paper" is entitled "Measured to enhance the overall functioning of ECOSOC: Issues and Recommendations, February 7, 2001.

second, to promote coherence, coordination and cooperation within the different parts of the United Nations System; and, third, to provide follow-up to major UN Conferences and Summits in the specific role that Resolution 57/270B assigns to the Council.

- In addition, ECOSOC could make an invaluable contribution to the work of the UN on the ground, by linking humanitarian assistance - relief and reconstruction - with the longer-term needs of development; the latter, of course, during the humanitarian segment. As stated earlier, consideration could be given to heighten the profile of this segment, but holding it on a biennial basis.
  - The Council could then proceed to give equally undivided attention to its other major role of providing oversight and policy guidelines to its subsidiary bodies (which includes greater coherence, coordination and cooperation between them), including the functional commissions, the regional commissions, the standing committees, as well as the expert and related bodies.
  - The separation of most of the topics now included in the general segment from the other segments would give delegates some "breathing space" in what constitutes, at present, a long session. In addition, it would provide time for informal consultations prior to the celebration of the general segment, when all of the documentation is presumably ready to be examined.
  - If some additional time were available during the general segment, the discussion and debate could presumably be organized in a more orderly manner.
13. I am aware of the fact that the above proposal raises a potentially controversial issue, regarding the venue of the Council's meeting. Clearly, in the years when the Council meets in Geneva, it would not be practical to separate one or more segments from the substantive session and ask delegates to travel twice to Geneva. However, the rationale of de-concentrating the Council's activities over time should not be held hostage to the separate issue of alternating the substantive sessions between New York and Geneva. On the other hand, phasing the substantive session into two or more parts should have no major financial or budgetary implications.
14. While operative paragraph 40 of GA resolution 50/227 states: "the Council shall hold a shorter, focused substantive session for four weeks in July," the Council could surely give a broader interpretation to the spirit of this mandate, and spread out its activities of roughly over four weeks over a re-scheduled calendar during the year. To make clear the purpose of this separation of activities, the Council might also wish to consider changing the description of the "General Segment" (which suggests all topics that do not find a niche in the other four segments) to a more descriptive title, such as "Oversight Segment", "Management Segment" or "General and Management Segment."
15. In short, I believe that the substantive activities of the Council could be strengthened and further focused by phasing the current four week session held in July into two separate parts - up to two and a half weeks to be held during June-July, and an additional one and a half weeks to be held later in the year. Such an arrangement, taken together with the enhanced role of the spring meeting with the Bretton-Woods Institutions and the World Trade Organization (now as a follow-up activity of the Monterrey Consensus), would, in my judgment, allow the Council a more rational way of distributing its substantive work load during the calendar year.
16. It is my hope that the Council could give these proposals consideration during a resumed substantive session.