



The President
of the
Economic and Social Council

**REMARKS OF GERT ROSENTHAL, PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
GUATEMALA, AT THE END OF HIS TERM AS PRESIDENT OF THE
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

(21 January 2004)

Distinguished Colleagues and friends:

It seems only a few weeks ago, but it has actually been one year, that I received from Ivan Simonovic the charge that I am about to pass on to Marjatta Rasi. This ceremony of transmission offers the outgoing President of the Council the opportunity to give a brief assessment of the Council's work during his term, and the incoming President the chance to outline his or her impending direction. It is also an opportunity to welcome the newly elected members of the Council who join us for the first time.

In addition, the act by itself is a signal of continuity, thanks to the tradition of allowing one of the outgoing bureau's vice-presidents to assume the presidency in the succeeding year. In this regard, I am particularly pleased to be handing over the stewardship of the Council to Marjatta Rasi, whose impressive experience and knowledge are widely recognized in this house.

I relinquish the Presidency more convinced than ever that the Economic and Social Council has a unique role to play within the United Nations in the furthering of development, international cooperation, the observance of human rights and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, I am persuaded that we are not making optimum use of the Council's potential to fulfill that role. It is my earnest hope that now that various initiatives for change are in the air – the revitalization of the General Assembly promoted by President Julian Hunte, the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change designated in October by Secretary-General Kofi Annan – we can also move ahead with the strengthening of the Economic and Social Council.

In that context, I am encouraged with the reactions that I received to my Memorandum of September 10, 2003 addressed to the members of this Council and containing some suggestions aimed precisely at its strengthening. In fact, my only regret with my Presidency is that the crowded calendar of the second committee before the holiday break did not give us the time for an adequate discussion on this matter. I hope that we can do so in the weeks ahead, now under the Presidency of Ambassador Rasi.

I believe that the key to have the Council rise to its potential can be found in a more ample, focused and rigorous fleshing out of each of its generic functions, as spelled out in articles 62 to 64 of the Charter. These functions include analytical, normative, advocacy, coordinating, and oversight activities. I would like to suggest the direction in which we should move in some selected areas.

The first thing I would like to discuss is the Council as a unique forum for our policy debate. Indeed, one of the things the United Nations does best is to explore emerging development issues, and make them understandable not only for policy-makers, but also for the proverbial man on the street. In other words, the UN debate ultimately does impact on public awareness, and also on policy prescriptions. The Organization has multiple arenas where the policy debate can and is undertaken, but, in my opinion,

the global forum best suited for a serious policy debate is the Economic and Social Council, given its mandate, its composition and its work ethic. From time to time, we have risen to the occasion, and made a significant impact on the real world, but this is not always the case. In fact, we need to heighten the bar of ECOSOC as a forum for policy debates in the future. And heightening the bar, or being more demanding, begins with the selection of the themes to be examined at our yearly high-level segment. It is imperative that the theme meet the test of relevance, for this will determine the quality of the discussion, the level of participation, and the impact of our forum on the real world. The selection of themes for the policy debate to be held one year down the line is arguably one of the single most important undertakings of the Council, but unfortunately it is not always approached in that spirit. My appeal is, then, not to view the high-level segment as a routine, once-a-year event, but as a singular opportunity to make vital contributions to the policy debate on issues of development and international cooperation.

In the second place, we need to take more seriously our role of promoting coherence, coordination and cooperation within the UN system and even within the Secretariat. To do so, we have a few powerful instruments at our disposal. I will mention three.

- One, of course, refers to the integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up to the outcomes of major United Nations conferences and summits, all of which offer us a common vision as well as internationally agreed development goals, especially those contained in the Millennium Declaration. General Assembly resolution 57/270B and ECOSOC resolution E/2003/6 have enhanced the capacity of the Council to use the conference follow-up as a framework for planning, monitoring and assessing the activities of the United Nations, which basically is another manner of introducing coherence, coordination and cooperation into our work.
- Another refers to our spring meeting with the Bretton-Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization and, as of this year, UNCTAD. Since the International Conference on Financing for Development took place, the spring meeting is part of its conference follow-up procedures. However, that meeting far transcends follow-up activities. Rather, it offers us the possibility of introducing a much greater level of coherence, coordination and cooperation into the work of the main multilateral institutions through closer interaction and understanding at the inter-governmental level and at the level of management. We will thus have to cultivate and develop our spring meeting as an essential component of the Council's activities.
- Yet another insufficiently utilized instrument is our interaction with the five regional commissions, whose role, among other aspects, is to bring the regional dimension to global issues, and to introduce global issues into the regional dimension. The natural link for this to take place, at the inter-governmental level, is the Economic and Social Council. Yet, we tend to dedicate less than a full working day to this very important activity, which translates into a serious under-utilization of its considerable potential.

In the third place, we are equipped to enhance our more general role of advocacy for development and international cooperation. As an illustration, I would like to highlight the impact we are having with our ad hoc groups on African countries emerging from conflict, in both Guinea-Bissau and Burundi. The existence of these groups *has* made a difference. It was my honor to represent ECOSOC on three separate occasions in meetings on both countries with the Security Council during the last quarter of 2003, bringing the two Organs to work together in a cooperative spirit. More importantly, this mechanism has had a tangible impact. Thus, last week the President of the ad hoc group on

Burundi, Ambassador Dumisani Kumalu, took our advocacy message to a donors meeting held in Brussels.

In the fourth place, the ECOSOC appears to be the main forum to bring humanitarian assistance into the mainstream of our agenda, and we can do more in this respect. This is especially so during the transition phase that links humanitarian activities on the ground with the development prospects of populations affected by natural or man-made disasters. I believe that we made some innovative progress in this regard last summer when we approved resolution E/2003/5, which was followed up by the General Assembly a few weeks ago through its resolution A/58/L.39, especially in underlining the need to consider the transition from relief to development in an integrated manner.

In the fifth place, and as I pointed out in my Memorandum of September 10, I believe that we do not do justice to our very important role of offering oversight and management direction to our very diverse and geographically wide-spread subsidiary bodies, including the functional commissions, as well as informing our own work by their activities. I believe that we must dedicate a greater effort to interacting with these bodies than has been the pattern in the past. This is particularly true for the Commission on Human Rights, which has its own subsidiary bodies (and some of those have their own subsidiary bodies, meaning that they are our own subsidiary bodies, three-times removed!). I cannot go into detail on this matter at this time, but I believe that members of the Council will appreciate that much can be done in this area in the interest of relevance.

In the sixth and last place, a special word is in order for our operational activities, as seen from the vantage point of coherence, coordination and cooperation. The major operational activities are in the hands of the programmes, which are subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly in the economic and social fields. I have now had the privilege of exercising the Presidency of both the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board and the ECOSOC. In spite of this personal experience, I would be hard pressed to explain the differences, in regard to the United Nations' operational activities, in the authority of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Executive Boards of the programmes. Clearly, there is need for some streamlining here. Clearly, also, it is highly desirable to strengthen the United Nations' operational arm, so that the Organization can complement its policy orientations with some specific technical support in the field.

Distinguished delegates and friends,

There are other topics that I would like to cover, but I certainly do not want to abuse of your time. So, I will limit my closing remarks to two points.

The first one is raised in my twice-cited memorandum of September 10, and would fall within the category of "working methods". The crux of my proposal is to separate the general segment from the other segments, but the same argument can be made for separating, say, the high-level segment, or the humanitarian assistance segment. My main point is that there does not seem to be any compelling reason to try and cram all our substantive activities into a single, four-week session. This point is now highlighted by the decision of the General Assembly, through resolution A/58/L.49, to examine whether it makes sense to load all of its substantive activities into a single, thirteen-week session.

The second point is that a reform agenda for ECOSOC is by no means exhausted with the aspects I have raised today. Among other issues that come up periodically I should mention the following:

- The Council's composition (for some, 54 members is far too many, for others it is not enough);
- The Council's functions (for example, some delegations question whether it should be the General Assembly, rather than the Council, that elects the members of our subsidiary bodies);
- The location of the Council's meetings (should we travel to Geneva biennially?);
- The demand for reform of some of our subsidiary bodies, and particularly the Commission on Human Rights and the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations.

All of these matters offer a daunting array of topics for a possible reform agenda. But we are not short of ideas to make the Council more relevant, and many of the proposals I have raised today could be implemented without major difficulties. I trust that the Council will act on some of them during its substantive session of 2004.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the hard work of my colleagues of the Bureau, and offer special thanks to Marjatta Rasi and Eeva-Liisa Myllymaki of Finland, Abdul Mejid Hussein and Teruneh Zenna of Ethiopia, Valery Kuchinsky and his collaborators of Ukraine and Murari Raj Sharma of Nepal. Also, my deep appreciation to members of the Secretariat, including, of course, Sarbuland Khan, Aliye Celik and Nikhil Seth. My thanks also go to my collaborators from the Mission of Guatemala, and especially Jose Briz and Monica Bolaños. But above all, thanks to all of you, members of the Council, for making the work of your Bureau during 2003 so easy. I end by expressing the hope that the year 2004 will be successful and fruitful for all of us.

Thank you