

Commission for Social Development
51st Session

Agenda item 2, adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters:
“Review of methods of work of the Commission for Social Development”
(Wednesday, 13 February, 2013, morning)

Chair’s Summary

Under agenda item 2, adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters, the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Ms. Daniela Bas, introduced the SG report “Review of methods of work of the Commission for Social Development” (E/CN.5/2013/12). The Commission then heard the intervention of His Excellency Néstor Osorio (Colombia), President of the Economic and Social Council. Statements were made by His Excellency Jan Grauls, Permanent Representative of Belgium, and His Excellency George Wilfred Talbot, Permanent Representative of Guyana, the co-facilitators of the informal consultations of the General Assembly on the further review of the implementation of Assembly resolution 61/16 on the strengthening of the Economic and Social Council. General discussion followed.

The SG report contains the responses of Member States to a note verbale circulated by the Secretariat of the Commission, for the purpose of identifying ways and means of improving and strengthening its work.

Key issues for consideration identified in the report include:

- how themes and emerging issues are selected, and how this can help the Commission fulfill its mandate, contribute to the Economic and Social Council and the global development agenda, and advance the post-2015 development agenda;
- how to improve interactions between delegations and UN system representatives, including regional commissions, as well as between delegations and civil society; and
- the extent to which the Commission fulfils its mandate, and the ways in which this can be improved.

The report concludes by suggesting that the Commission: 1) consider enhanced collaboration with other functional commissions, and between the Commission and the Council; and 2) taking into account ongoing Council reforms and proposals, strengthen its role as the main actor supporting the Council on issues related to the social dimensions of sustainable development.

The President of ECOSOC, His Excellency **Mr. Néstor Osorio** shared reflections on the ongoing process aimed at strengthening ECOSOC system, and how this process relates to the subsidiary bodies and to the Commission. In the Rio+20 outcome document, it was recognized that the key role of ECOSOC is to achieve a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

He noted that the Council, in its resolution 2012/30, requested the Secretary-General to submit to the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly a report containing proposals to strengthen the Council, including its working methods. The process of strengthening the Council has been ongoing and in the next few weeks consultations will continue with the aim of increasing coherence within the ECOSOC system. A strengthened ECOSOC should have a strong thematic focus and be able to tap into the knowledge and expertise of well-recognized specialized bodies. In this context, strengthening the Council's relation with the functional commissions is of the utmost importance, with the aim to create a unified vision and a streamlined agenda. The formulation of an annual main theme for the entire ECOSOC system has been suggested in the ongoing negotiations as one way to increase coherence and foster coordinated contributions. He went on to note that the two-year cycles adopted by some inter-governmental bodies, including this Commission, may not be the best way to ensure contributions to the main theme of the Council every year.

He stated that in order to comply with the mandate of Rio+20, the Council could review the work of the functional commissions from the perspective of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. In this context, the Commission for Social Development has a particularly important role to play as it embodies the social pillar of sustainable development. Contributions of the Commission on poverty reduction, employment, empowerment of people and social inclusion are of great relevance to the Council. Each Commission would best serve the Council by providing clear recommendations and technical guidance on how ECOSOC could integrate their inputs into the larger picture of sustainable development. He also suggested that the Council's annual sessions could be used to integrate the outcomes.

He proposed ideas for promoting regular dialogue and engagement between the Council and the subsidiary bodies and among functional commissions and the expert bodies. This would help to avoid fragmentation of inter-governmental processes and promote a more integrated programme of work. To that end, joint meetings could be organized and chairpersons could be systematically invited to the sessions of other commissions, with the goal of promoting cross-pollination of ideas and recommendations.

The joint meeting of the ECOSOC Bureau with the Chairpersons of the Council's subsidiary bodies can be used to map possibilities for further coordination and to plan for joint activities. In the context of a reformed ECOSOC, these meetings could be held more often to discuss various issues of relevance to the whole ECOSOC machinery, such as coordinated inputs to the annual theme of the Council, the contribution of the ECOSOC system to the post 2015 development agenda and Rio+20 follow-up processes, and enhanced modalities for vertical and horizontal interaction within the ECOSOC system. The next meeting, to be held in late March, will be a good opportunity to learn the outcome of the deliberations under this agenda item. Mr. Osorio indicated that the outcome of the General Assembly consultations on strengthening of ECOSOC would be clearer by that time.

H.E. Mr. Jan Grauls, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations and co-facilitator of the informal consultations of the General Assembly on the review of the implementation of resolution 61/16, noted that the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference is an important starting point for the facilitation of this work. The

outcome document tasks ECOSOC to: 1) ensure that the three dimensions of sustainable development are fully integrated in a balanced manner; and 2) ensure the follow-up to all major United Nations conferences and High-level meetings, including the World Summit for Social Development.

Current efforts, including four rounds of consultations by Member States, have focused on how this task can be achieved. Key issues that have emerged include: 1) how to improve the relevance of ECOSOC; 2) what is the role of ECOSOC in enhancing coordination and coherence within the UN system; and 3) the follow-up to Rio+20. Co-facilitators introduced “food for thought” papers in order to improve the debates. The idea is to move towards a second phase to produce a list of possible deliverables: “food for progress”. Member States are still in reflection mode and nothing has been decided yet though a few clear tendencies have emerged:

1. ECOSOC needs a more focused and more relevant agenda. It should produce real added value.
2. ECOSOC should work on the sequencing of activities on its annual agenda, which could mean to revisit the current segments with a high concentration in July – better spread of activities connected to other events throughout the year could bring added value.
3. Create greater coherence and reduce duplication of work within the UN system.
4. Coordinate the outcomes of major UN Conferences: Rio, Cairo, Copenhagen, etc. The form the link will take is still unclear, but it has emerged as an important topic. This will help avoid duplication between the political forum and ECOSOC.

In conclusion, he stated that in order to improve coherence and coordination, streamlining is important both in terms of the content of discussions and agendas of the various bodies. There was a proposal to create an annual team to organize dialogues to capture global challenges faced across the United Nations system, which would contribute to “issue coherence” rather than simply “structural coherence.” Through a well chosen theme, ECOSOC could provide a forum for dialogue and debate on cross-cutting issues among its subsidiary bodies. Further, ECOSOC should be more responsive humanitarian crises. Flexibility to address specific issues that don’t fit in easily to the current structures is also needed. The need for a more focused “executive reporting” that would highlight the main issues and their linkage to a main theme was underlined, as this would help improve discussions with subsidiary bodies.

H.E. Mr. George Wilfred Talbot, Permanent Representative of Guyana and co-facilitator noted that given the new role of ECOSOC in integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development, the quality of engagement must undergo some reform. He welcomed hearing from delegates on how to strengthen the role and relationship of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies in this regard.

General Discussion

Ireland, speaking on behalf of the European Union, noted that the social dimension of sustainable development is more important than ever, and the Commission should

use its mandate to better advise the Economic and Social Council on matters relating to social development. Given that poverty eradication, employment and social integration are not separate issues, the delegation stated that the Commission may wish to review its three-pillar approach with a view to integrating it, and possibly consider a human rights-based approach to social development. The EU indicated support for considering a multi-year program of work more closely linked to that of the Council. The delegation also expressed concern for the negotiation and adoption of the “double resolutions” that were also regularly adopted by other bodies, such as the main committees of the General Assembly. It was considered necessary for the Commission to be more dynamic and attract wider interest. The delegation proposed that Chairpersons or Bureaux of different bodies should meet regularly to share information and explore synergies. Best practices shared by Member States during the Commission should be better documented so that they could be shared with other commissions. Further, they noted it would be useful if bureau members attended other Commissions. The delegation indicated that they would support further discussion on the meeting time and support increased use of web-casting, social media tools and the Commission’s website to reduce its paper workload.

The delegation of **Mexico** stated that the Commission should review its role in strengthening ECOSOC and in elaborating the post-2015 development agenda. New schemes for cooperation and the positive exchange of views would be critical. In this regard, the Commission could be strengthened if there was follow-up to the Commission’s deliberations at the national and regional level. The delegation concurred with the previous speaker on the need to recognize and reduce duplication of resolutions between the Commission and those of the General Assembly. It was considered useful to review the biennial cycle of work and improve the identification of theme. The idea of holding preliminary sessions where delegations could engage in an exchange of ideas on the priority theme was proposed. To strengthen ECOSOC, he suggested that the Council could annually adopt a common theme and each functional commission could provide inputs. Such an “inter-sessional integration session” could be created within ECOSOC to enhance the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. In addition, the Council should not just be a place for exchange but for evaluation of agreed objectives, a substantive discussion on development priorities, and contributing to deliberations on the post-2015 development agenda. More direct and substantive inputs on priority themes are necessary from a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society, academia and research institutions. The delegation concluded by encouraging other delegations to be more active and participate in and contribute to the process.

Switzerland stated that the goal of any change in the methods of work should be to reinforce the role of the Commission in the United Nations System and to enhance the relevance of the work of the Commission in the discussion of the social dimension of sustainable development. They reiterated the call to reduce duplication and create added value, and suggested institutionalized dialogue between the Commission and the other functional commissions and international organizations. The delegation also highlighted the importance of the emerging issue agenda item and proposed linking it to the issue to be discussed in ECOSOC later in the year in order to make the work of the Commission more relevant to ECOSOC. The regular review of working methods could contribute to enhancing the relevance of the Commission’s work in the United Nations. The delegation concluded by noting the importance of the conviction of

delegations to the Commission in ultimately determining its relevance and calling on delegations to engage in the work of the Commission with determination in order to reinforce its role in the global dialogue on social development.

The Russian Federation reaffirmed their deep appreciation of the Commission as an important global platform, and expressed hope that the Commission would continue to be an effective coordinator in the social fields. The delegate stated that the long-standing criticism that the body had become irrelevant was unsubstantiated. The current session, which contained considerable reference to the Rio+20 outcomes and the post-2015 development agenda, reaffirmed this. However, as is the case for any long-standing bodies, it required a review of its working methods. The delegation expressed regret that only eight countries responded to the note verbale circulated by the Secretary-General and hoped that a fuller picture will emerge through this discussion. The delegation went on to express that the two-year cycle has been effective, and comments regarding duplication of work between the Commission and the General Assembly are unfounded. He further noted that the Commission added a social perspective to the development agenda and emphasized that the United Nations is only as effective as Member States allowed it to be. Regarding documentation, he stated that thematic reports could be improved with their statistical bases expanded, and reduced in number. Its discussion could bring added value if they were genuinely interactive rather than consisting of a series of long presentations. The delegation concluded by expressing support for maintaining the role of the Commission.