

BRIEF IV. ECOSOC Subsidiary Bodies

This brief is part of a series aimed to provide background information on ECOSOC strengthening. Briefs include (i) ECOSOC mandates and evolution of functions; (ii) policy dialogue and guidance; (iii) guiding and promoting a coherent and coordinated UN system; (iv) subsidiary bodies; (v) relationship with the General Assembly, Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council; (vi) countries in special situations; and (vii) addressing emergency issues.

In 1946, ECOSOC created six Functional Commissions: The Statistical Commission, the Population Commission, the Commission on Social Development, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the Commission on Human Rights. Over the years, additional Commissions, Committees and Expert Bodies have been created, merged and abolished. In addition, the Council created the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in 1947, the Economic Commission for the Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 1948, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in 1958 and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in 1973. These Regional Commissions are the regional outposts of the United Nations in their respective regions and they have among their key objectives the promotion of the regional implementation of internationally agreed development goals, including the SDGs.

« Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies »

The current ECOSOC system¹ includes eight functional commissions, deliberative bodies whose role is to consider and make recommendations on issues in their respective areas of responsibility and expertise in the economic, social and related fields, including population and development, statistics, gender equality and the empowerment of women, narcotic drugs, crime prevention and criminal justice, science, technology and development, among others. In effect, they constitute the technical arm of the intergovernmental machinery and help establish global norms and standards in their areas of expertise. These bodies have their unique membership and own approaches. Some are policy-oriented and provide policy options, suggest indicators and benchmarks, and carry out the detailed analysis of the economic and social issues needed to inform the substantive work of ECOSOC.

Other more technical bodies that tend to work with and for their own constituency also provide expertise essential for the functioning of aspects of the global economy. For example, the Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters promotes international cooperation on tax matters and keeps under review the United Nations Model Double Taxation Convention between Developed and Developing Countries. The Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods promotes sustainable transport that is safe, clean and competitive, by improving traffic safety, environmental performance, energy efficiency, inland transport security and efficient service provision.

The functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies generally meet annually during the first five months of the year. Their recommendations, contained in their reports to the Council, are considered during the June and July Management Meetings of ECOSOC's session. When negotiated outcomes are adopted by a subsidiary body, the Council is often expected to endorse them without repeating the discussions on what is being recommended. But it reviews and can negotiate draft resolutions recommended for its adoption.

« Functional Commissions »

In an effort to enhance policy coherence, ECOSOC subsidiary bodies have evolved, and their functioning has been modified, including through redefining their terms of references, regrouping or discontinuing.² The General Assembly, in its resolutions 50/227 called on the Economic and Social Council to fully implement its authority to take final decisions on the activities of its subsidiary bodies and on other matters in its system-wide coordination and overall guidance functions in the economic, social and related fields. Resolution 52/12B requested the review of "mandates, composition, functions and working methods of the Functional Commissions and Expert Groups and bodies with a view to ensuring more effective and coordinated discussions and outcomes of their work". This was followed by resolution 57/270B which again requested the subsidiary bodies to review their working methods to better maximize their impact on the implementation of major UN conferences.

¹ For information on other subsidiary bodies, please click on <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/subsidiary-bodies-ecosoc>

² A/RES/50/227; A/RES/51/240; A/RES/52/12B; ECOSOC Resolutions 1997/61, 1998/46, 1999/51 and 2001/27.

The Council has also undertaken numerous initiatives to improve interaction with its subsidiary bodies, in particular its Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies. ECOSOC resolution 1998/46, mandated the Council to hold joint bureau meetings with each of the functional commissions. Those meetings provided the opportunity for the commissions to highlight the important aspects of their work and how they would support the Council's theme to be considered in that particular year. In the period 2002-2006, the Council hosted a dialogue with Chairpersons from the various Commissions during the Coordination Segment of the annual substantive session. To promote a more efficient approach, resolution 2006/44 led to the replacement of the meetings with each bureau of Functional Commissions and expert bodies with one meeting with the Chairpersons to be held at the beginning of each calendar year during which issues of agenda-setting, horizontal and vertical coordination were discussed. This year, for the first time, the ECOSOC Bureau decided to open its [meeting with the Chairs](#)³ to the membership of the United Nations and civil society.

The Council's subsidiary bodies, including the Regional Commissions, have an important role in supporting ECOSOC's mandate on policy review and guidance. Following the 2005 Summit, in its resolution 61/16, the General Assembly mandated ECOSOC to oversee system-wide coordination and the balanced integration of economic, social and environmental policies and programmes aimed at promoting sustainable development, providing direction towards the substantive unification and coordinated follow-up of the UN development agenda. The subsidiary bodies were also requested to strengthen their contributions to ECOSOC's agenda, particularly its new functions, the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) and the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF).

« Subsidiary Bodies and 2030 Agenda »

According to the 2030 Agenda, while the thematic reviews of progress on the SDGs, including cross-cutting issues, were envisioned to take place at the HLPF, they could be supported by reviews by the ECOSOC functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies and forums. Those reviews should reflect the integrated nature of the Goals as well as the interlinkages between them. The General Assembly decided to adopt one main theme for the HLPF and ECOSOC (A/RES/72/305), which has allowed greater focus in the work of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies. They embraced the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as a way to enhance their impact and contribution to the HLPF.

« ECOSOC's Oversight and Coordination Role »

ECOSOC has been mandated to strengthen its oversight and coordination role of its subsidiary bodies. The Council is expected to request its subsidiary bodies to ensure that they best support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the work of the Council and the HLPF through an integrated and action-oriented approach to the SDGs and policy recommendations that build on evidence-based review of progress on the 2030 Agenda (Para 28-29 of Annex of A/RES/72/305). In the past, the Council discharged these functions through its former General Segment and subsequently the Coordination and Management Meetings. The GA resolution 72/305 expanded the mandate of the integration segment for the Council to ensure an adequate division of labour among its subsidiary bodies and harmonization and coordination of their agendas and work programmes (para. 2 of Annex of A/RES/72/305).

With GA resolution 72/305, the mandate of the ECOSOC Integration Segment has also been clarified to provide substantive, integrated and technical policy guidance on the annual theme of ECOSOC which should feed into the HLPF. The duration was changed from 3 days with a general debate to one day prior to the HLPF. The Segment was to provide space for substantive discussion building on the rich work of its subsidiary bodies and pursuing coordination and guidance to the subsidiary bodies. While efforts have been made to cluster agenda items, the shortening of the meetings to a two-day segment, twice per cycle and their new focus on the procedural and sequential adoption of the outcomes of subsidiary bodies, the Management Segment was also not able to deliver on ECOSOC's coordination role. The duration and the timing of the Integration Segment does not allow reflection of its key messages in the Ministerial Declaration of ECOSOC and HLPF and does not allow for the extraction of messages and the definition of recommendations regarding how the subsidiary bodies or the UN system entities should better promote the integration of the three dimensions in a coherent way.

Many subsidiary bodies have embraced the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. But they do not appear to have taken action with regard to their working methods in response to resolution 72/305 for reasons related to timing of document preparation, scheduling of meetings and availability of rooms among others. In the past, ECOSOC has provided specific advice in the form of a resolution or decision such as 1998/46⁴ and [2006/44](#).

³ <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/events/2020/meeting-economic-and-social-council-chairs-functional-commissions-and-expert-bodies>

⁴ [https://undocs.org/E/1998/98\(SUPP\)](https://undocs.org/E/1998/98(SUPP)) pages 74-80