

Informal thematic meeting convened by the co-facilitators  
for the intergovernmental negotiations for the review process of the Economic and Social Council and  
the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF)

Non-paper by the co-facilitators<sup>1</sup>:  
6 March 2020

Review of the implementation of GA resolution 72/305 on  
Strengthening the Economic and Social Council

***The present note aims to support the continuing discussions on the General Assembly review of the implementation of the resolutions on the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) and ECOSOC. It provides an overview of issues related to resolution 72/305 on ECOSOC strengthening. It does not aim to be exhaustive nor does it represent the views or proposals of the co-facilitators.***

## I. Background

The mandates of the Economic and Social Council have been defined by the Charter of the United Nations and various General Assembly resolutions. The responsibilities of the United Nations in the area of international economic and social cooperation established by the United Nations Charter are “vested in the General Assembly and, under the authority of the General Assembly, in the Economic and Social Council”. The UN Charter envisions that ECOSOC may make recommendations with respect to any international economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters to the General Assembly, to the Members of the United Nations, and to the specialized agencies concerned (article 62). The Charter also gives to ECOSOC the mandate to coordinate the activities of the specialized agencies.

ECOSOC’s diverse functions were reaffirmed in General Assembly resolution 72/305 as well as previous resolutions, including 68/1 and 61/16. They include, very broadly, policy dialogue and policy guidance; coordinating and ensuring the accountability of the UN development system; coordinating the work of the broader UN system including specialized agencies; supervising and guiding its subsidiary machinery; and addressing new and emerging issues (see box 1).

Efforts to strengthen the Council have been ongoing almost since its creation. General Assembly resolution 72/305 on strengthening ECOSOC, the latest in this effort, addressed a wide range of issues, including aligning the theme of ECOSOC and the HLPF, refocusing the mandate of some segments and reducing their duration, revisiting the ECOSOC calendar, and enhancing the Council’s oversight and coordination of its subsidiary bodies. Resolution 72/305 decided that its “arrangements...shall be reviewed at its seventy-fourth session and at subsequent review cycles in conjunction with the review process of the high-level political forum on sustainable development”.

In the present note, the co-facilitators have taken the liberty to include not only proposals that are being discussed but also a few possible issues to trigger the discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> This non-paper should be read in conjunction with the non-paper on the HLPF prepared for the informal thematic meeting on the HLPF.

## II. ECOSOC in the SDG Era:

Member States and other actors agree that, at the start of the decade of action on sustainable development, and on the eve of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, ECOSOC, as a UN Charter body, should be fully relevant, fit for purpose, and action oriented. Many Member States have said that the Council's role in policy guidance, oversight and coordination should be strengthened and built upon to address the three dimensions of sustainable development. The GA review of resolution 72/305 is the opportunity to equip ECOSOC for supporting the 2030 Agenda and effectively discharging its functions and ensure that the full potential of ECOSOC is realized.

### Box 1: ECOSOC's roles and functions based on resolution 72/305:

ECOSOC has:

- A policy guidance role: resolution: the Council is “a principal organ for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on issues of economic and social development”. It has a “leadership and policy guidance role”. “It should promote a coordinated follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> and the outcomes of other major United Nations conferences ...”.
- A coordination role: This includes
  - Ensuring the accountability of the UN development system in relation to the 2030 Agenda and GA guidance on operational activities: the Council is to provide guidance to, and coordination of the activities of the UN development system and its specialized agencies.
  - Coordinating the full scope of the work of the broader development system, including specialized agencies. The Charter established that “[ECOSOC] may co-ordinate the activities of the specialized agencies through consultation with and recommendations to such agencies and through recommendations to the GA and to the Members of the UN”.
- A supervisory role over its subsidiary bodies, “while integrating their analysis throughout its segments”.
- A role to “address new and emerging issues in the economic, social, environmental and related fields”

The focus of the work of the Council has evolved over time to respond to various development frameworks. The Council has promoted the integrated follow-up to major UN conferences and summits in the 1990s and then reviewed the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in the 2000s. In 2015, ECOSOC shifted its focus to promoting a coordinated UN system support to Member States in the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and other international commitments.

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<sup>2</sup> Resolution 70/1.

### III. ECOSOC Functions and segments

#### *Structure and duration of ECOSOC session and segments:*

GA resolution 72/305 recommended to regroup ECOSOC forums and segments at three moments in the year (see box 2). This aimed to give greater visibility to the meetings of ECOSOC and increase synergies between them.

Box 2: ECOSOC segments and forums during the year based on 72/305:

First group: ECOSOC forums -- Development Cooperation Forum every second year and, annually, the forum on financing for development, the multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation, the partnership forum and the youth forum.

The second group -- operational activities segment, humanitarian affairs segment and the informal special event to discuss the transition from relief to development.

The third group -- segments and forums that provide overall policy guidance and foster progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda-- the integration segment (one day and a Vice-President's summary), the high-level political forum (8 days and a declaration) and the high-level segment (one day in addition to the three days jointly convened with the HLPF ministerial days, and the same declaration).

Management Segment-- no more than two days, twice per cycle. In addition, dedicated management meetings are held to conduct elections.

Some Member States want the review of 72/305 to preserve the current structure of the segments. Others have argued for discontinuing the high-level and integration segments -which they feel do not deliver on their functions, with some proposing to use the time allotted to those segments (one day each) for increasing the duration of the HLPF. Yet another proposal is to shorten the sessions of some of the subsidiary bodies and, instead, use the days for the HLPF.

There have also been discussions about the timing of some of the segments. Some delegations have noted that holding the operational activities segment in May (so as to be close to the annual session of the executive boards as mandated by 72/305) is too late to reflect the outcome of the segment in the reports to the executive boards. The scheduling of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment also complicates the timely production of the report of the Secretary-General given the timing for the availability of data.

The discussions on the structure and duration of the session need to take into account the various functions of ECOSOC and whether the Council is equipped to deliver on them.

#### *ECOSOC's role regarding policy dialogue and policy guidance*

The Council discharges its policy dialogue and guidance function in particular through its High-level Segment. Resolution 72/305 envisioned that the High-level Segment would provide the space to enhance regional and international cooperation and knowledge sharing on current and future trends and scenarios impacting the achievement of the SDGs. This shifted the focus of the segment which used to include a dialogue on the theme and one on the world economic situation with financial and trade institutions.

There has been limited participation by Member States in the last day of the high-level segment which is held the day after the HLPF. Some delegations find that the segment has lost its relevance and see the HLPF as the culmination of the ECOSOC cycle. There have, on the other hand, been proposals to re-establish the high-level segment as a prominent ECOSOC platform for Ministers and heads of UN system entities to discuss high-level policy guidance to foster progress in SDG implementation (for example by disconnecting it from the HLPF). The high-level segment and the HLPF adopt the same negotiated ministerial declaration. For legal reasons, this declaration is adopted once by the HLPF and once by ECOSOC - a practice that many Member States want to discontinue.

Some Member States have underscored that the complementarity between ECOSOC and the HLPF should be increased to better align with the 2030 Agenda. As one example, ECOSOC could discuss the policy guidance that would be necessary to implement the conclusions of the HLPF reviews and the integrated policies recommended by the HLPF. It could mobilize various actors to ensure implementation and support to VNR countries, including the UN system, the private sector, civil society, young people, or others such as possibly local governments. ECOSOC could also strengthen its support to the thematic reviews of the HLPF, depending on the approach they take.

It has been underscored that ECOSOC should give greater attention to the situation of countries in special situation, including SIDS, LDCs, LLDCs.

### *Guiding and promoting a coherent and coordinated UN system*

ECOSOC's functions to guide and coordinate the UN system is currently delivered in its Integration Segment, Operational Activities Segment and Humanitarian Affairs Segment.

Resolution 72/305 broadened the mandates of the **Integration Segment**, which now include, in addition to its previous mandate to develop integrated policies based on inputs of subsidiary bodies and others: coordination and guidance of subsidiary bodies, coordination of the UN system as well as preparations of the HLPF thematic review based on the inputs of subsidiary bodies. The GA review can assess whether ECOSOC can deliver on those functions in an impactful way within the current arrangements (see box 2).

As the organ of the UN explicitly mandated by the Charter to coordinate the activities of the specialized agencies, ECOSOC is also expected to bring coherence in a decentralized UN system where each agency also reports to its own governing body. There has been a feeling that ECOSOC's coordination of the UN system is not effective enough and that its policy outcomes have a limited impact on UN system entities.

In addition to coordination of policy and normative work, the Council is the preeminent UN mechanism for the oversight and coordination of the UN development system operational activities, at its **operational activities segment**. Some Member States have called for strengthening this segment and turning it into a universal platform. ECOSOC's ability to hold the UN system accountable for its performance and results in supporting countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda may be reviewed in the context of the 2020 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of UN system operational activities (QCPR) or through the present review.

Regarding coordination of humanitarian assistance, some countries have proposed to strengthen ECOSOC **Humanitarian Affairs Segment**. It has also been proposed to improve the informal Transition Event convened jointly by the ECOSOC Vice-Presidents responsible for the Operational Activities Segment and the

Humanitarian Affairs Segment. The purpose would be to recognize that there is usually not a linear transition from relief to development, and that humanitarian crises require coherent humanitarian and development collaboration.

Issues related to UN system integrated support to specific countries or regions are on the agenda of ECOSOC **Management Segment**. They relate to support to the Sahel region, the report of ECOSOC Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Haiti and integrated support to South Sudan. Member States could consider whether those issues would benefit from a more in-depth discussion, which is not possible in the current mandate of the Management Segment.

The same may apply to other system wide coordination issues appearing on the agenda of the Management Segment, such as gender mainstreaming in the work of the UN system, the inter-agency task force on non-communicable diseases, the report of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN), the review and coordination of the implementation of the Program of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 or the report of UNAIDS or the report on coordination aspects of the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

### *Providing leadership, oversight and coordination of subsidiary bodies*

One of ECOSOC's key responsibilities is to guide, oversee and coordinate the work of its subsidiary bodies. The **Integration Segment** is where ECOSOC should look at the combined work of all its subsidiary bodies to ensure such coordination and an adequate division of labour as well as address possible gaps and duplications. The Management Segment, on its part, is dedicated to the sequential examination of the reports of individual subsidiary bodies and the consideration of their recommendations and draft proposals.

Resolution 72/305 noted that ECOSOC should:

- strengthen its oversight and coordination role of its subsidiary bodies. It should review their work with a view to ensuring their continued relevance. It will also ensure that they produce technical and expert analysis, assessments and policy recommendations to inform the integrated view of the Council and inform efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. It should effectively integrate the outcomes of its subsidiary bodies into its own work (para.26)
- request its subsidiary bodies to ensure that they best support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the work of the Council. Their work should reflect the need for an integrated and action-oriented approach to the SDGs. Their recommendations should build on a solid evidence-based review of progress on the 2030 Agenda and of the outcomes of conferences and summits in their respective area. They should work in an efficient, effective, transparent and inclusive manner (para. 29).

Each subsidiary body was called on to consider whether there is a continued need for annual negotiated outcomes and ensure that, when they produce such outcomes, they are effective and action-oriented and result in increased levels of cooperation. The need to adjust the calendar of meetings of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and/or make adjustments to their reporting arrangements was raised in the light of agreed changes to the structure and timing of Council meetings and to make recommendations to the Council for its consideration, as appropriate.

Many Member States have called for instituting new ways for ECOSOC to guide the work of its subsidiary bodies. This is consistent with the mandates of 72/305. Some Member States have also asked questions about the relevance and expert nature of the work of some subsidiary bodies.

Following 72/305, efforts to strengthen ECOSOC's oversight and coordination of its subsidiary bodies have been conducted mainly through initiatives by the ECOSOC President and the Bureau, who convened or wrote the Chairs of subsidiary bodies to engage them in the follow-up to 72/305. But there has not been a resolution of ECOSOC conveying new guidance to its subsidiary bodies based on 72/305, nor a mandated report or a background document that would allow Member States to, for example, identify gaps, duplications or other coordination issues in the work of subsidiary bodies.

The former President of ECOSOC asked Chairs of subsidiary bodies to informally report on their respective body's follow-up to 72/305. The responses showed that many subsidiary bodies have embraced the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Most bodies had aligned their respective themes with the main theme of the 2019 HLPF and ECOSOC, but this could not be done in 2020 since the theme was only known recently. Some expressed the continued need for annual negotiated outcomes, as those include policy guidance and have the ownership of Member States. Subsidiary bodies also have taken steps to produce technical and expert analysis, assessments and policy recommendations to inform the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The five regional commissions are key subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC. Many feel that regional dimensions are insufficiently recognized in the HLPF. ECOSOC reviews a report on regional cooperation, including the actions proposed by regional commissions, and is to discuss the analysis of regional commissions on the situation in their region. It used to have a dialogue with the Executive Secretaries of regional commissions. This dialogue was moved to the HLPF. But, for the last two HLPF sessions, it was decided instead to address regional dimensions in the various sessions. There is also a panel with the Chairs of regional forums on sustainable development in the HLPF. The GA review is the opportunity to consider ways to reestablish the importance of regional dimensions in ECOSOC.

### *ECOSOC within the broader UN architecture*

Some Member States have emphasized the need to ensure a balance between the responsibilities of the General Assembly and those of ECOSOC. Others consider that there is a lack of clarity on the division of labour between ECOSOC and the GA.

### *Questions for discussion*

- Should the GA review focus only the implementation of the provisions of 72/305 or should it explore other ways to improve the functioning of ECOSOC and strengthen its relevance in light of the Decade for Action?
- What steps would need to be taken to strengthen the Council's capacity to provide high-level policy guidance and foster progress in SDG implementation within the context of the Decade of Action? How could it best complement and bolster the HLPF?
- How can ECOSOC be better equipped to fulfil its Charter mandate of promoting policy coordination and coherence among the UN system, including the specialized agencies, particularly in key areas emanating from the 2030 Agenda?

- Are changes needed in the various segments and the structure of the session?
- How can the Council provide better guidance to its subsidiary bodies and help channel their contributions to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? How ECOSOC's work be best supported by the subsidiary bodies?
- What further improvements are needed in the work of subsidiary bodies?
- How can ECOSOC provide better guidance for integrated, coherent and coordinated support to countries which are considered during the Management Segment?
- Should further steps be taken to strengthen the contribution of civil society, the private sector and other actors such as local governments or scientists in the work of the Council?