



ECOSOC

United Nations Economic and Social Council

TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE LIVES

Meeting of the Economic and Social Council with the Chairs of the Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies

31 January 2020, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm

ECOSOC Chamber

BACKGROUND NOTE

Introduction

The ECOSOC system 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, providing policy options, suggesting indicators and benchmarks, and carrying out the detailed analysis of economic and social issues needed to inject substance into the proceedings of their parent body, ECOSOC. These bodies have their unique membership and own working methods. Some are policy oriented and provide policy options, suggests indicators and benchmarks, and carry out the detailed analysis of the economic and social issues needed to inform the substantive work of ECOSOC. Other bodies, that are more technical in nature, tend to work with and for their own constituency and help establish global norms and standards on a number of issues, including statistics, drug control, crime prevention.

ECOSOC's range of technical work through its expert bodies extend into areas that require international cooperation for the functioning of the global economy. The Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters, for example, promotes international cooperation on tax matters, while the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) provides guidelines on public administration issues. The Committee for Development Policy advises the Council on a wide range of issues relevant to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and defines the List of the Least Developed Countries. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) provides expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the UN system through ECOSOC.

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. Typically, when negotiated outcomes are adopted by a subsidiary body, the Council is most often expected to endorse them without repeating the discussions on what is being recommended.

Oversight and Coordination

In an effort to enhance policy coherence, ECOSOC subsidiary bodies have evolved, and their functioning has been modified.¹ The General Assembly, in its resolutions 50/227 called on the Council to fully implement its authority to take final decisions on the activities of its subsidiary bodies and on other matters in its system-

¹ A/RES/50/227; A/RES/51/240; A/RES52/12B; E/1997/61, E/1998/46, E/1999/51, 2001/27.

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.

The Council has also undertaken numerous initiatives to improve interaction with its subsidiary 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 joint bureau meetings with each bureau of the Functional Commissions and specific 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.

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).

Recent Developments

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, the subsidiary bodies were requested (para. 85), within the context of their respective mandates, to conduct thematic reviews of progress in achieving sustainable development, in support of the review and follow-up responsibility of the high-level political forum (HLPF). Their contribution represents an important part of ECOSOC’s contribution to the HLPF. The annual joint bureau meeting has therefore become the space for discussing ways to consolidate the ECOSOC system as a unifying platform for integrated approaches in follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda thus contributing to the coherence and coordination demanded of ECOSOC by Member States.

The General Assembly, in resolution 68/1, called on ECOSOC to promote the harmonization and coordination of the agendas and work programmes of the functional commissions by promoting a clearer division of labour among them and providing clear policy guidance to them. It also tasked the Council to conduct action-oriented reviews of the activities, reports and recommendations of the subsidiary bodies. Furthermore, it called on the subsidiary bodies to review the resolution in relation to their respective work programmes with a view to exploring necessary adjustments and changes to their methods of work, reporting and timing of their sessions. This was intended to facilitate consideration of substantive changes to their work programmes, and to find meaningful ways to contribute to ECOSOC and the HLPF.

Following the adoption of the resolution, some functional commissions adopted a multi-year programme of work to align with the main theme of ECOSOC and to support the thematic reviews of the HLPF. The subsidiary bodies have included in their report an executive summary with conclusions and recommendations and issues that require attention by the Council. In addition, the President of ECOSOC has invited the functional commissions and expert bodies to submit contributions which are included in a synthesis of voluntary submissions, the latest version of which for the 2019 session is contained in document E/HLPF/2019/4. It appears that Member States have not fully availed themselves of the opportunity to respond to issues raised

by subsidiary bodies. Draft resolutions proposed by subsidiary bodies are sometimes adopted without the Council having discussed their content. It is noteworthy that no changes were made to the reporting and timing of the sessions which made it difficult to contribute effectively to ECOSOC and the HLPF.

In its resolution 72/305 on the review of the implementation of resolution 68/1 on the strengthening of ECOSOC, the General Assembly noted that ECOSOC should:

- ensure an adequate division of labour among its subsidiary bodies and harmonization and coordination of their agendas and work programmes, while ensuring that the principles, critical aspects and implementation gaps of the 2030 Agenda are addressed (para. 2)
- improve its outcomes and the outcomes of its subsidiary bodies, making them more relevant, coherent and solution-oriented to address implementation challenges and ensuring their follow-up so as to strengthen the impact of the work of the Council (para. 3)

The General Assembly called on the subsidiary bodies to adopt their own respective themes, aligned with the main theme of the Council (para. 5). Furthermore, the General Assembly decided that the integration segment (para. 11), which will be held for one day immediately before HLPF, would:

- discuss and consolidate all the inputs of Member States, including case studies and lessons learned, the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, the UN system and other relevant stakeholders to promote the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development;
- bring together the key messages from the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and the UN system on the main theme, develop action-oriented recommendations for follow-up and feed into the HLPF;
- coordinate the work of the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, promoting a clearer division of labour among them, and the policies and activities of the specialized agencies relating to the SDGs and other internationally agreed development goals.

The General Assembly renamed the coordination and management meeting as the management segment and decided that the meetings would focus on the adoption of procedural decisions, consideration of recommendations of subsidiary bodies, as well as the introduction of reports and consideration of draft proposals submitted under relevant agenda items.

The General assembly also 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.

Again, 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.

Implementation of Resolution 72/305

In view of the implications of resolution 72/305 on the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, the former ECOSOC President, Ambassador Inga Rhonda King, convened a joint meeting of the ECOSOC Bureau with the Chairs of subsidiary bodies and an ECOSOC Presidential Retreat in January 2019 to discuss some of the important provisions of the resolution. During the joint meeting, the chairs shared how their respective bodies are contributing to the strengthening of ECOSOC. They highlighted issues such as the challenges of ensuring greater consistency, complementarity and synergies among subsidiary bodies as well as the need for effective communication between subsidiary bodies and ECOSOC, and for putting the spotlight on the work of subsidiary bodies in ECOSOC and the high-level political forum on sustainable development. Most subsidiary bodies indicated that their ability to plan their future inputs was being hampered by not having future themes of ECOSOC and HLPF (post-2019) decided in advance.

One of the key messages from the 2019 ECOSOC Presidential Retreat was the need for the Council to improve its own guidance by harnessing the work of its subsidiary bodies, including through the Integration Segment, to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. There was overall agreement that ECOSOC could improve on building on the work of its subsidiary bodies to support its own guidance. Discussions highlighted the need to also better utilize the work of ECOSOC segments and forums and to promote an inter-connected and coherent ECOSOC system. While the work of the ECOSOC system was praised, concern was expressed about limited substantive discussion or dialogue within the Council. ECOSOC was encouraged to explore additional opportunities for engagement with its subsidiary bodies. One of the proposals was a special lunch with the ECOSOC Bureau, that could include presentations of findings from subsidiary bodies. The Council could also reflect on the work of its subsidiary bodies and identify the gaps.

In its resolution E/RES/2019/11, the Economic and Social Council reiterated the request to its subsidiary bodies to organize the dates of their sessions to allow for the timely issuance of their reports, recommendations and input prior to the relevant segments and meetings of the Economic and Social Council, bearing in mind the July-to-July cycle of the Council and the relevant rules and practices relating to advance availability of documentation.

Former ECOSOC President, Ambassador Inga Rhonda King, also requested chairs of subsidiary bodies to provide an update on their actions in response to GA resolution 72/305. Responses highlighted 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 responses expressed the continued need for annual negotiated outcomes, as those include policy guidance and have the ownership of Member States. Responses also highlighted efforts by subsidiary bodies to produce technical and expert analysis, assessments and policy recommendations to inform the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC ²

Functional commissions

- [Statistical Commission](#)
- [Commission on Population and Development](#)
- [Commission for Social Development](#)
- [Commission on the Status of Women](#)
- [Commission on Narcotic Drugs](#)
- [Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice](#)
- [Commission on Science and Technology for Development](#)
- [United Nations Forum on Forests](#)

² For information on other subsidiary bodies, please click on <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/subsidiary-bodies-ecosoc>

Expert bodies composed of governmental experts

- [Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods and on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals](#)
- [Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting](#)
- [United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names](#)
- [UN Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management \(GGIM\)](#)

Expert bodies composed of members serving in their personal capacity

- [Committee for Development Policy](#)
- [Committee of Experts on Public Administration](#)
- [Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters](#)
- [Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#)

Other related bodies

- [International Narcotics Control Board](#)