



U.N. REFORM WATCH no. 20

Analyses from Associates of CENTER FOR U.N. REFORM EDUCATION

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A Strengthened United Nations' Economic and Social Council. Agreement on draft resolution still delayed

By Irene Martinetti

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A Resolution on the strengthening of the United Nations Economic and Social Council is expected to be adopted by the end of the month of October. A draft resolution was distributed as early as January 2006, but its adoption has been delayed by disagreements amongst Member States on some key issues such as allocation of additional resources, the collaboration of ECOSOC with the Peacebuilding Commission, and its enhanced role in humanitarian affairs, among others.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the United Nations' principal organ for the coordination of economic and social issues, and related work of all the specialized agencies and the functional and regional commissions belonging to the UN System. Chapter X of the UN Charter entrusts the Council with the responsibility to "make or initiate studies and reports with respect to international economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters and may make recommendations with respect to any such matters to the General Assembly, to the Members of the United Nations, and to the specialized agencies concerned."ⁱ The Council is ultimately charged with the responsibility of promoting higher standards of living worldwide by advancing full employment, economic and social progress; identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems; facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation; and encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Despite its ambitious mandate the Council has thus far exercised little authority in international policy making. In fact, the 54 member body, placed under the direct authority of the General Assembly (GA), has often been heavily criticized for its ineffectiveness while other international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have taken the lead in the field of global economic policy. In recent years, the international community has voiced strong support for the strengthening of the role of the Economic and Social Council both within the UN system as well as in its function as significant player in the global economy. In June 2003, with the adoption of resolution A/RES/57/270B,ⁱⁱ the Council was assigned the crucial mandate to follow up on the implementation of the outcomes of UN conferences and summits. Further resolve to strengthen the UN Economic and Social Council came from the World Summit held in September 2005,



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when UN Member States agreed to reform and reinforce the Council by enhancing its existing mandates as well as by assigning it new key functions.

The new functions to be entrusted to the ECOSOC are enshrined in paragraphs 155 and 156 of the World Summit Outcome Document.ⁱⁱⁱ Recognizing the need for a more effective organ for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on issues of economic and social development, Member States suggested that the Council should "serve as a quality platform for high level engagement" between States and financial institutions, the private sector and civil society on emerging global trends. Member States requested that a biennial high-level Development Cooperation Forum be held to review trends in international development cooperation and to promote coherence amongst actors in the development sphere. ECOSOC was also entrusted with following up the outcomes of the major UN conferences and summits through, *inter alia*, annual ministerial-level reviews to assess the progress that had been made. Moreover, Member States asked the Council to play a bigger role in the coordination of funds, programs and agencies in order to ensure better coherence and avoid duplication of mandates and to "support and complement international efforts aimed at addressing humanitarian emergencies."

Since December 2005, informal consultations of the Plenary of the General Assembly have been conducted under the co-Chairmanship of H.E. Mr. Johan C. Verbeke, Ambassador of Belgium, and H.E. Mr. Cheick Sidi Diarra, Ambassador of Mali, with the aim of reaching agreement on how to implement the recommendations contained in the Outcome Document. On 26 January 2006, the Co-Chairs circulated a first draft resolution on the strengthening of the Economic and Social Council.^{iv} However, even though the resolution was drafted at an early stage of the ongoing reform process triggered by the Summit, Member States were unable to come to an agreement within the time frame of the 60th General Assembly, as originally hoped. As a result, the informal consultations have continued into the 61st session of the General Assembly and are still ongoing at this time. Some agreement on the resolution was expected to be reached by the end of the month of October, but to date Member States are still struggling over a few points of contention and adoption of the resolution is likely to be postponed further.

The latest version of the draft resolution, circulated on 8 September 2006, recognizes ECOSOC's role as a principal body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and for the implementation of international development goals; it reiterates that the Council is the central mechanism of system-wide coordination to promote integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up to the outcomes of the major UN conferences in the economic, social and related areas and decides that the Council "should promote global dialogue and partnership on global policies and trends in economic, social,



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environmental and humanitarian fields by providing a quality platform for high-level engagement among Member States and with the international financial institutions, the private sector and civil society on emerging global trends.” Such high-level dialogue should be based upon a Special high-level meeting with the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The draft resolution also decides that ECOSOC shall “provide a platform for Member States to exchange lessons learned” and to be open to participation of all stakeholders including UN agencies, civil society, international financial institutions and regional organizations, among others. It requires that ECOSOC enhance coherence by identifying gaps and obstacles, provide policy guidance in development cooperation and hold a biennial high-level Development Cooperation Forum in alternate years to review trends in international development cooperation and give policy guidance. The draft resolution also requests the Secretary General to prepare an analytical background report to submit for consideration to the Forum.

With respect to the role of ECOSOC in following up on the outcomes of major UN conferences in the field of economic, social and related fields, the draft resolution determines that such a review should focus on thematic clusters and use a cross-sectoral approach. Progress is to be assessed during Annual Ministerial Reviews. Functional commissions and other relevant organs are requested to contribute to ECOSOC’s assessment of outcomes. Voluntary presentations from Member States on the subject matter under review are highly recommended, and the Bretton Woods institutions and WTO are also invited to contribute their input.

To strengthen the humanitarian affairs segment of the Council, the draft resolution requests the ECOSOC to support and complement international efforts and help to strengthen the UN’s effectiveness in humanitarian assistance, but Member States have not yet come to an agreement on the *modus operandi* the Council is to use in this respect. The G77 proposes that the Council convene “ad-hoc meetings on specific humanitarian emergencies upon request of the affected Member State and following recommendation of the Bureau,” in order to raise awareness and promote engagement for the prompt delivery of assistance. The US, EU and Switzerland would prefer the convocation of ad-hoc meetings with the agreement of the Member States involved, but not necessarily requested by them or recommended by the Bureau, with the aim to raise awareness and engagement of stakeholders but without the obligation under the ECOSOC umbrella to ensure prompt delivery of assistance.



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The role of the Council in the overall coordination of funds, programs and agencies represents another point of contention among Member States. The US, EU, Switzerland and CANZ (Canada, Australia and New Zealand) propose that its role be reaffirmed to ensure coherence and avoidance of duplication of mandates. The G77 proposes that the Council's role in providing guidance for operational development should be reinforced including objectives, priorities and strategies in the implementation of policies formulated by the General Assembly. In addition, the US, EU, Switzerland and CANZ recommend that implementation of current reforms should be strengthened by a stronger and better performing UN country presence, including a reinforced role of UN's senior resident official, a proposal that the G77 does not endorse.

Granting additional resources to the Economic and Social Council seems to be one of the most crucial points of contention delaying agreement on a resolution to strengthen ECOSOC. The G77 argues that if indeed ECOSOC is to be strengthened, additional resources should be approved by means of the resolution. The US and EU prefer instead to leave the decision on additional resources to a later and more specific stage in the process when the amount of resources needed, and to what ends, will have become clearer. For instance, although Member States agree that "insufficient provision of conference services and substantive support to the Council's meetings has at times impeded the Council's ability to fulfill its mandate," the G77 wants to include wording in the resolution that provides that "full and substantive support" be ensured for "all meetings necessary up to 10 weeks," while the US, EU, Japan and CANZ would rather omit such detailed references.

Lastly, Member States are disagreeing on the interpretation of the modalities of interaction between the Economic and Social Council and the Peacebuilding Commission stemming from the provisions contained in the resolution establishing the Commission, A/RES/60/180,^v adopted on 30 December 2005. While the G77 emphasizes that ECOSOC should function as a mechanism through which the special needs of countries emerging from conflict are addressed and assistance is provided to lay the foundation for sustainable development, the US, EU, CANZ, Japan and Switzerland tend to simply underline the importance for ECOSOC to take action based on the advice of the Peacebuilding Commission. The G77 also requests that the Peacebuilding Commission report regularly to ECOSOC on its activities.

Member States are currently under pressure to reach swift agreement on a resolution, as Mr. Carlos Ruiz of Mexico has been appointed as a facilitator at the ongoing informal "informal" consultations. At the time of writing, Member States are engaged in an effort



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to reach agreement on whether the resolution should grant additional resources for conference services or leave this discussion for a later stage. Once this issue will be resolved, consultations will tackle all additional points of contention. The first endeavor of a strengthened ECOSOC will be to prepare for the first Annual Ministerial Review, planned for the Economic and Social Council session of 2007. The groundwork for the Annual Ministerial Review promises to be substantial. Without clear and established indications, it will become increasingly difficult to effectively organize the review, thus undermining the UN's stated effort to strengthen the Economic and Social Council.

ⁱ "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter X, Art. 62, signed on June 26, 1945, came into force 24 October 1945.

ⁱⁱ A/RES/57/270, "Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration," July 31, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ A/RES/60/1, "2005 World Summit Outcome," September 15, 2005

^{iv} Draft from ReformtheUN.org

^v A/RES/60/180, "The Peacebuilding Commission," December 30, 2005