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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Control and limitation of documentation in the United
Nations system

Comments of the Secretary-General



The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on control and limitation of documentation in the United Nations system (A/36/167).

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. In document A/36/167/Add.1, the Secretary-General has transmitted the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Control and limitation of documentation in the United Nations system" (A/36/167). It is noted in those comments that the executive head of each organization will provide the respective governing body with specific observations on the recommendations of JIU as they may apply in the case of that organization. There follow the observations of the Secretary-General in respect of the United Nations.

2. As a general observation, the Secretary-General reiterates the concern that he has frequently expressed at the implications of the steadily increasing volume of documentation, be it meetings records, reports, publications or other forms of material. The cost is high and the utility is often questionable - not just in relation to the cost, but in itself. This concern has led the Secretary-General to make a number of suggestions and to encourage and support suggestions by others - JIU among them - as to how to keep the documentation within manageable limits. He is, of course, aware that his concern is shared by delegations, who have themselves taken initiatives in this area. But, with all due respect, the concern expressed in the General Assembly and its General Committee and Fifth Committee, and in the Economic and Social Council, is often noticeably lacking, particularly in the subsidiary, so-called "programme", bodies, when more meetings and more reports are called for. And in the General Assembly itself, the requests for reports by the Secretary-General have more than doubled in the last three years. In this context, the Secretary-General would again point out that the objective of control and limitation of documentation can only be effectively sought by means of a joint effort of Member States, as represented in the various bodies, and the Secretariat.

A. Recommendations which require decisions by the legislative organs of the United Nations organizations

Recommendation 1: The intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations organizations should periodically review their calendar of conferences and meetings with a view to reducing their number and duration and their frequency, in order, inter alia, to achieve a reduction in the volume of documentation without impairing the efficiency of their activities.

3. The General Assembly has on several occasions called for its subsidiary bodies to conduct reviews of this nature in connexion with the pattern of conferences. The Secretary-General would encourage such reviews by the subsidiary bodies, but believes that substantial progress in reducing the number and duration and frequency of meetings of subsidiary bodies can only be made by decision by the General Assembly itself. To a large extent, the need for meetings of subsidiary bodies is a function of the agenda of the General Assembly; if the Assembly could agree that

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certain items on its agenda could be considered less frequently than annually, the subsidiary bodies that prepare the reports on those items might not feel required to meet every year.

4. The Economic and Social Council, under its procedures, and in consultation with the Committee on Conferences as necessary, itself reviews and establishes the programme of meetings for its subsidiary bodies and co-ordinates its agenda accordingly.

Recommendation 2: The procedure established in the Economic and Social Council resolution 1979/69, and endorsed by the General Assembly, concerning the implementation of the six-week rule should be extended to the implementation of the 32-page rule.

5. The Secretariat would, of course, be able to provide information to the bodies concerned as to which documents exceeded the 32-page rule, and the reasons therefor. However, the Secretary-General would suggest that at this point it would be preferable to allow the various bodies to become accustomed to, and to respond to, the information that is now provided on the adherence to the six-week rule. The internal Secretariat procedures that apply for any exceptions to the 32-page rule would continue to be enforced, and certainly any member of any body which receives a secretariat report that exceeds 32 pages is at liberty to seek an explanation.

Recommendation 3: Those organizations of the United Nations system which have not yet established rules concerning maximum length of various types of documents should consider establishing such rules as well as a procedure for ensuring effective control over their implementation.

6. While the United Nations has adopted the 32-page rule for documents prepared by the Secretariat, it has not established any rule - in terms of number of pages - for reports of subsidiary bodies or expert groups. While recognizing the difficulties which may be involved, it is noted that such reports constitute a substantial bulk of the documentation placed before the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, and the establishment of a page limit would be welcome. Should the General Assembly be unwilling to establish a limitation in numbers of pages, it might decide that reports submitted to it by any body that receives written meeting records (verbatim or summary) should not, save in exceptional cases, include a summary of the debates; the General Assembly has already adopted this rule for the reports of its Main Committees.

Recommendation 4: The rules established by the United Nations on the timely issuance of documents deserve the attention of those United Nations organizations which have not yet established such rules.

7. This recommendation is not addressed to the United Nations.

Recommendation 5: United Nations organizations which now use the system of issuing verbatim records in each working language should consider introducing the multilingual system.

8. The Inspectors, in paragraphs 69 and 70 of their report, describe three types of multilingual verbatim record. One, used by WHO, consists of an immediate issuance containing each intervention in the official language in which it was made; subsequently, by translation, final versions are issued in each language. UNESCO provides a single multilingual verbatim record in which interventions in either English or French are recorded only in the language of the speaker - interventions in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are recorded in the language of the speaker, followed by a translation into either English or French. FAO's practice is close to that of UNESCO; its verbatim records, provisional and final, are trilingual (English, French and Spanish). In their recommendation, the Inspectors do not indicate a preference among the three forms.

9. A further form that might be considered is that of issuing the verbatim records in written form only in the official language in which the interventions were made, relying on sound recordings of the interpretation into other official languages for consultation in those languages. Technological advances in the electronic field have been dramatic in the period since the United Nations was established and its approach to meetings records was designed. Reliance on sound recordings, which was not conceivable when the only method of recording was on bulky wax, or later acetate, discs which had limited life is now a practical reality.

10. Certainly the provision of verbatim records is the source of substantial expenditure, and the Secretary-General would be glad to explore with Member States - perhaps in the first instance in the Committee on Conferences - any alternative to the present method of providing them which might satisfy the needs of the Organization at a lower cost. He would, however, point out that changes which would increase the translation workload, a/ could, depending on the nature of the change, possibly result in higher cost and/or introduce great delays in the production of the records.

Recommendation 6: Discontinuance of the summary records of the subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council and of the General Assembly should, after the experimental periods, be retained on a permanent basis.

Recommendation 7: The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should consider dispensing with verbatim and summary records for their bodies whenever possible. They might also request their secretariats to play a more active role in advising intergovernmental bodies on measures to limit meeting records.

11. By its resolution 35/10 B, of 3 November 1980, the General Assembly decided

a/ Except for Chinese, the present method of producing verbatim records at Headquarters utilizes checked interpretations rather than translation.

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to review the matter of summary records at the thirty-sixth session on the basis of recommendations of the Committee on Conferences. The Secretary-General assumes that this review will constitute the Assembly's response to recommendation 6 above.

12. As regards recommendation 7, the Secretary-General notes that the General Assembly has already addressed such requests to its subsidiary bodies, the latest instance being its resolution 35/10 B. Based on its experience over the years with this type of exhortation, the Secretariat is of the opinion that these appeals have been effective only when the Chairman and perhaps other officers of the body concerned take an interest in the matter and the provision of records is not interpreted as a measure of the "importance" of the body.

13. It might be appropriate for Member States to give some thought to the question of the role of and necessity for written meeting records at all. An argument could be made that, in principle, subsidiary bodies should not have written meeting records, particularly in view of the increasing importance of the negotiating character of the work of such bodies - the search for action-oriented consensus. Views of Member States on the matter dealt with by the subsidiary body could be reflected in the written records of the General Assembly, its General Committee and its Main Committees, and the three Councils. One might also argue that the records of these latter bodies should all be verbatim. It would be difficult to give cost comparisons as between the present situation and such an approach without also determining the procedures under which the verbatim records would have to be produced and the form they should take (see recommendation 5 above). But perhaps the question should not be based on budgetary considerations, but rather on a more fundamental reconsideration of the régime of written meeting records which may be best suited to the needs of the Organization at its current stage of development, bearing in mind the technological advances which have been made.

Recommendation 8: It would be desirable that the intergovernmental bodies of United Nations organizations include in the agenda of their sessions regularly the question of discontinuing production of recurrent documents which have become redundant or have lost their usefulness, and issuing some documents at less frequent intervals. These bodies might wish to request their secretariats to exercise their judgement in identifying such documents.

14. On several occasions, the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council have requested intergovernmental bodies to make reviews of their documentation needs - particularly in respect of recurrent documents. The Secretary-General would welcome a reiteration of the rule that the agenda of subsidiary bodies should periodically include an item on control and limitation of documentation.

Recommendation 9: In the United Nations, it would be useful: (a) to change the title of "the Committee on Conferences" to "the Committee on Conferences and Documentation"; (b) to extend the terms of reference of this committee to include provisions concerning the various phases of the document production process.

15. The Secretary-General would note that the terms of reference of the Committee on Conferences include the following:

"To recommend to the General Assembly means to provide the optimum apportionment of conference resources, facilities and services, including documentation, in order to ensure their most efficient and effective use;

"To advise the General Assembly on current and future requirements of the Organization for conference services, facilities and documentation."

(General Assembly resolution 32/72,
paras. 3 (c) and (d))

In his opinion, these provisions entitle the Committee to discuss all aspects of documentation.

16. As regards the title of the Committee on Conferences, the Secretary-General believes that the Committee has attained an identity with its present title which would not be enhanced by lengthening it.

Recommendation 10: United Nations organizations, particularly the larger ones, should consider entrusting one of their intergovernmental bodies with the task of reviewing the implementation of decisions adopted by their legislative organs on the control and limitation of documentation.

17. The General Assembly, by its resolution 34/50, entrusted this function to the Committee on Conferences.

B. Recommendations which could be implemented by the executive heads of the United Nations organizations without the specific authorization of their legislative organs

18. The recommendations made by the Inspectors under this heading repeat in large measure some of the recommendations made by them last year in reporting on the translation process in the United Nations system. The comments of ACC on those recommendations were contained in document A/35/294/Add.1, and the Secretary-General comments below on individual recommendations repeat some of the observations made therein.

Recommendation 11: United Nations organizations should consider introducing a documents quota system as appropriate.

19. The United Nations experimented, in the early 1970s, with a quota system applicable to documents originating in the Secretariat. It was permitted to lapse, mainly because it was found to be unworkable in a situation where the nature and volume of documentation is determined largely by Member States. The utility of the "quota" lay largely in its representing a bench-mark for limiting documentation; the 32-page rule now in effect plays the same role. The Secretary-General does agree that the programme budget should reflect by programme the cost of documentation and meetings services; this is done now through the so-called "apportioned costs". To attempt, however, to administer the provision of central services in the same way as appropriations would, in his opinion, substantially

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detract from the flexibility of those services to respond to the priority needs of the Organization as they arise.

Recommendation 12: Each organization should strengthen its documents control unit and give it the authority required to enforce the established rules and procedures. Where central editing units exist, they should be related closely with documents control.

20. In the United Nations, the day-to-day task of enforcing the established rules and procedures regarding documentation is shared by Documents Control in the Department of Conference Services and the recognized central editorial control units in the Division of General Assembly Affairs, the Office of Secretariat Services for Economic and Social Matters and the Department of Conference Services, these editorial units acting under the policy guidance of the Chief Editor who is also the Director of the Division in which Documents Control is organizationally located. These arrangements, together with the authority vested in the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services for implementation of rules and procedures relating to documentation, provide, in the opinion of the Secretary-General, adequate central authority in this field. This central authority extends to other offices of the United Nations, but in some cases the practical arrangements at those offices should be strengthened. The Secretary-General will attempt to do so as opportunity permits.

Recommendation 13: Editorial control services need to be strengthened in all United Nations organizations in order to improve the quality of documents and reduce their length.

21. The Secretary-General believes that the several editorial control units in the United Nations have sufficient authority to carry out their functions effectively in respect of secretariat documents. They do encounter some difficulties when dealing with delegations, either singly or in intergovernmental bodies, when their efforts to control documentation are sometimes criticized as being unresponsive to political considerations, or as bureaucratic interference. While increasing the staff in such units might appear attractive, budgetary restraints exist; further, the efforts of these units to improve the quality of documents or reduce their length is as much impeded by late submission from author sources as by lack of numerical strength.

Recommendation 14: Each United Nations organization in its in-service training programme should provide courses in drafting skills and editing.

22. While courses in drafting skills exist in the United Nations, it is recognized that they are not as extensive as they might usefully be. The Office of Personnel Services is developing plans to increase the number and intensity of these courses.

Recommendation 15: The United Nations rule specifying that "in order not to impede the scheduled processing of documents, once they are submitted to documents control, only corrigenda will subsequently be accepted" might be considered for application by other United Nations organizations.

23. This recommendation is not addressed to the United Nations.

Recommendation 16: United Nations organizations should thoroughly analyse costs incurred for regular staff, temporary assistance and contractual services for translation and typing of documents and, without sacrificing basic quality, select, according to circumstances, the solution that is cost-effective.

24. The question of achieving the most advantageous combination of regular staff, temporary staff and contractual services to perform the required translation and typing functions, taking into account both cost on the one hand and quality on the other, is a matter of regular management attention and decision. The normal budgetary processes bring this matter under routine review. Most often the decision in specific cases is dictated by the circumstances at that time.

Recommendation 17: United Nations organizations should undertake thorough studies of the cost-effectiveness of modern documentation technology and proceed in accordance with their findings.

25. The Secretary attempts to keep itself fully informed on technological advances which are applicable to documentation, and does, either itself or through the commissioning of expert consultant advice, undertake thorough studies before proceeding with applications in the processing of documentation. A problem that arises is to obtain delegation agreement to changes in traditional services; the minimal response by delegations to the possibilities of use of microfiche is a case in point.

Recommendation 18: The terms of reference of the Interagency Meeting of Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications should include responsibility for identifying effective methods of control and limitation of documentation which may be adopted by individual organizations.

26. The purpose of the Interagency meeting is to enable officers responsible in the several organizations for language arrangements, documentation and publications to exchange views and experience on matters of common concern. Effective methods of control and limitation of documentation can be an item for such an exchange at a forthcoming meeting.