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PROGRAMME PLANNING

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on the setting of priorities and the identification  
of obsolete activities in the United Nations

Comments of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Report on the setting of priorities and the identification of obsolete activities in the United Nations" (A/36/171).



ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. Background

1. At its twentieth session, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) decided that a review of the system previously utilized in setting priorities should be undertaken in which:

"the criteria and method to be employed in setting such priorities for the medium-term plan for the period 1984-1989 would be determined by the Committee at its twenty-first session. The Secretariat should prepare a brief report outlining the major issues and providing the Committee with suggestions of appropriate ways to make that decision." <sup>1/</sup>

Subsequently, the General Assembly, in paragraph 6 of resolution 35/9, endorsed this decision and requested the Committee to "determine new criteria and methods to be employed in setting programme priorities".

2. The General Assembly has before it the report of the Secretary-General on this issue (A/C.5/36/1). Inspector Bertrand of the Joint Inspection Unit has also provided a report (A/36/171) as a contribution to the CPC and General Assembly debate on the issue. The CPC at its twenty-first session considered both reports, had an extensive debate on the recommendations contained in them, and has formulated recommendations <sup>2/</sup> on priority setting for consideration of the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session. At the time of the CPC debate, however, the comments of the Secretary-General on the report of JIU were not available since that report was issued only shortly before the commencement of the CPC session.

3. These comments on the JIU report therefore focus on its recommendations and take into account those of CPC and those of the Secretary-General on this issue. In most cases, the CPC recommendations already provide a synthesis of the JIU and Secretariat recommendations that is satisfactory from the viewpoint of the Secretary-General. Where this is the case these comments simply refer to and concur with the CPC recommendations. It is only in the few instances where the CPC recommendations did not cover those of the JIU or where the CPC has asked for proposals by the Secretary-General in his comments on the JIU report that a more elaborate response is given.

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<sup>1/</sup> Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/35/38), para. 323.

<sup>2/</sup> Ibid., Thirty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/36/38), paras 453-472.

## 2. General observations on the report

4. The report of the JIU on the setting of priorities and the identification of obsolete activities in the United Nations constitutes a follow-up to previous reports on the general subject of programme planning and programme budgeting but focuses on two distinct components of the planning and programming methodology, namely, the setting of priorities among programmes and the pruning out of activities which have become obsolete. As evidenced by the several previous reports and debates on these subjects and the difficulties encountered in trying to reach definitive conclusions, the United Nations is here confronted with two particularly complicated problems and the latest contribution of Inspector Bertrand is most welcome and very useful.

5. In the context of these issues, the Secretary-General wishes to draw attention to certain issues that have been raised at the regional level, namely:

- (a) The diagnoses and analyses in the report do not take sufficiently into account the regional commissions' responsibilities in setting regional priorities and the need to introduce the regional dimensions in the central priority-setting process;
- (b) Programme budget implementation, and, hence delivery of output, depend upon both regular budget and extrabudgetary resources; in certain programme areas, extrabudgetary resources make up a very high proportion of over-all resources and the delivery rate is closely linked to the availability of those resources.

6. Several recommendations of the report are directed at intergovernmental bodies; in such cases the Secretary-General leaves the decisions to the bodies concerned and refrains from commenting on the recommendations.

7. On most of the recommendations addressed to the Secretariat, the Secretary-General can agree with the substance of the recommendations of JIU and his comments deal chiefly with methods of implementation.

## 3. Observations and proposals on specific recommendations

### A. Making official the regulations on planning and programming and studying certain changes

Recommendation No. 1: The establishment, with a view to their approval by the General Assembly, of official regulations (on the lines of the Financial Regulations or Staff Regulations) on methods of planning, programming, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation.

8. CPC, at its twenty-first session, recommended to the General Assembly that it should "adopt official rules and recommendations governing programme planning, the programme aspects of the budget, performance monitoring and evaluation procedures, and requests the Secretary-General to submit proposals to the General Assembly at

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its thirty-seventh session through CPC at its twenty-second session". 3/ The Secretary-General supports these recommendations. It should be noted, however, that further consideration needs to be given as to the level of detail required.

Recommendation No. 2: A statement in programme budgets of the value, as a percentage of subprogrammes, or in man-months, of each programme element or output.

9. Estimates in professional work-months of the effort to be devoted to each programme element in the proposed programme budget are made in the internal programming documents in the Secretariat as part of the process of formulating the programme budget. Should an intergovernmental committee wish to have such information it can be made available either orally or in writing with respect to any programme element or elements. The Secretary-General, however, feels that to include this further detailed information in the already voluminous printed document for each of the 2,000 or more programme elements would unduly increase the volume of the proposed programme budget document.

Recommendation No. 3: The adoption of rules governing methods for amending the list of outputs provided in the budget: division of authority between the Secretariat (for the first 30 per cent of the number of outputs) and intergovernmental bodies (beyond the 30 per cent limit).

10. The Secretary-General agrees that it is necessary to adopt a procedure to amend the outputs listed in the programme text of the proposed programme budget since, as was stated in the report on the specification of output in the programme budget (A/C.5/35/2, para. 35):

"The purpose of identifying output in the proposed programme budget is to provide international community a comprehensive list of the intentions of the Secretary-General for the delivery of final output during the budgetary period to the international community."

Such a list is needed in order to: (a) present to CPC, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth Committee a statement of what will be delivered as a result of the expenditure of the resources requested; (b) provide a reference for subsequent performance monitoring and reporting (*ibid.*)

11. Those procedures could be incorporated in the instructions to be proposed to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session, should recommendation 1 and the CPC recommendation quoted above be agreed to.

12. In a related recommendation, CPC has requested the Secretary-General to make proposals for "central and independent unit ... for monitoring the implementation of the commitments made by the Secretary-General in the programme narratives of the proposed programme budget for the delivery of output". 4/ The CPC recommendation

3/ *Ibid.*, para. 465.

4/ *Ibid.*, paras. 466-468.

indicates that such a monitoring unit should be responsible for, amongst other things, the accurate determination of actual output delivery and a role under official rules and regulations in decisions involving significant change in the intended output of a Secretariat unit. The Secretary-General's comment on this CPC recommendation are set out below, paragraphs 23 to 25.

B. Adopting new procedures and new methods

Recommendation No. 4: The transmittal of the medium-term plan to all the Main Committees of the General Assembly, so that they may consider and approve the parts which concern them.

13. CPC, at its twenty-first session, recommended to the General Assembly that "each chapter of the proposed medium-term plan should be submitted to an appropriate Main Committee of the General Assembly before the plan as a whole is adopted by the General Assembly in plenary meeting". 5/ The Secretary-General does not, of course, object to this recommendation in principle. However, the recommendation if adopted would entail certain problems of procedure, timing and documentation which would need to be resolved before its implementation.

Recommendation No. 5: The adoption of new procedures to reduce, either at the end of the first year of the budgetary period or, at the latest, in the middle of the second year, the appropriations in current programme budgets for subprogrammes whose implementation is manifestly inadequate.

14. The Secretary-General agrees to the concept of curtailing resources for subprogrammes whose implementation is "manifestly inadequate". Since a review at the end of the first year of the budgetary period will be in general too early to make any clear-cut decisions on implementation, the alternative proposal of JIU, namely, a review in the middle of the second year of the budgetary period, would in principle be preferable. However, since the larger part of resources in the United Nations programme budget are for staff it will not be possible to release significant resources from such subprogrammes in the second year of a biennium since the bulk of the appropriated resources will have already been expended. It therefore follows that the implications for some unit consequential to a finding of inadequate implementation in one biennium would have to be applied to the unit's budget for the subsequent biennium.

Recommendation No. 6: The adoption of a method of reviewing the medium-term plan that makes it practicable to reject a proportion of the proposed subprogrammes.

15. Such a review of draft medium-term plans takes place within the Secretariat during the preparation of the final document. This internal review includes discussion the desirability of the strategies proposed by the substantive unit and

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5/ Ibid., para. 471.

very often extensive redrafting of the unit's initial proposals. The Secretary-General feels that each subprogramme plan submitted for intergovernmental review should be a firm proposal of the strategy considered best suited for implementation of the relevant mandates. After an extensive discussion of this issue at its twenty-first session, CPC adopted recommendations on the intergovernmental review of plan proposals which envisaged a scrutiny by intergovernmental bodies resulting in "the acceptance, curtailment, comprehensive reformulation or rejection of subprogrammes proposed in the plan". 6/ It would appear that such a procedure, which would include guidance by intergovernmental bodies in the redrafting of certain subprogramme plans, would constitute a full response to this JIU recommendation.

Recommendation No. 7: The adoption of a method of considering budgets that is complementary to the critical scrutiny of subprogrammes which has already been carried out at the time of approval of the plan.

Recommendation No. 8: The adoption of a method for systematic and regular review of ongoing activities.

16. The recommendations in the Secretary-General's report on setting explicit priorities among United Nations programmes (A/C.5/36/1, paras.54- ) proposed that a critical scrutiny and systematic review should be institutionalized in a manner which corresponds with the six-year medium-term plan cycle. CPC has recommended that a report on the operation of this new system of setting priorities should be submitted to the General Assembly through CPC in 1984. 7/ This report will include an assessment of the results of the review conducted in connexion with the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1982-1983. The Secretary-General considers that this new system is a method of review that will comply with the intent of JIU recommendations 7 and 8.

Recommendation No. 9: The adoption of three criteria (importance of objective, capacity of the Organization, and effectiveness of units) for classifying priorities.

17. CPC at its twenty-first session conducted an extensive discussion of the criteria which could be utilized in priority setting and has made recommendations for the adoption of a number of criteria which vary with the programmatic level involved. 8/ The criteria set out in both the report of the Secretary-General and the report of JIU were among those that CPC recommended. Should this recommendation be adopted, the Secretary-General will incorporate these criteria in the relevant internal programme planning instructions.

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6/ Ibid., para. 455.

7/ Ibid., para. 472

8/ Ibid., para. 464.

C. Establishing new functions and new mechanisms

Recommendation No. 10: The adoption of special procedures for dealing with conflicting criteria.

Recommendation No. 11: Differentiation between the "proposing" function and the "critical diagnosis" function within the Secretariat, and instituting ways of conducting priorities analysis, in particular for the preparation of introduction to the medium-term plan.

18. CPC at its twenty-first session made detailed recommendations to the General Assembly on the criteria and method to be used in setting priorities among United Nations programmes. 9/ Should these recommendations be adopted, their implementation would appear to fulfil the intent of these two JIU recommendations.

Recommendation No. 12: The setting up of independent "diagonostic teams" outside the Secretariat.

19. This recommendation is aimed at assisting intergovernmental review of programme plans proposed by the Secretariat. Since the recommendation is directed at intergovernmental bodies and would appear to propose a modification of their working methods, the Secretary-General would leave decisions concerning this recommendation to these bodies. There was a debate on the concept in CPC at its twenty-first session, but the Committee did not adopt any recommendation on the establishment of independent diagnostic teams.

Recommendation No. 13: Study of the possibility of instituting a "function of analysing the types of staff required for programme implementation".

20. Should the General Assembly require it, such a study will be undertaken within the Secretariat, the results of which will be reported to the General Assembly under the procedures governing the follow-up to approved JIU recommendations.

Recommendation No. 14: The setting up of a standing committee within the Secretariat capable of forming a judgement on and drawing conclusions from evaluation reports or particularly harsh critical diagnoses.

21. A high-level Steering Committee with functions similar to those indicated in the JIU report has existed for several years as part of Secretariat arrangements for conducting the periodic in-depth evaluations requested by CPC. The Steering Committee is convened in an ad hoc manner as is necessary to deal with each evaluation, but could be institutionalized to form the Standing Committee recommended by JIU. The Director-General performs in a broader context and on a continuing basis the functions mentioned in the JIU recommendation.

9/ Ibid., paras. 453-472.

D. Initiating study of the reorganization of the intergovernmental machinery dealing with the programme and budgets

Recommendation No. 15: Exploration of the possibility of establishing in the United Nations a "single intergovernmental committee" to review plans, programmes and budgets.

Recommendation No. 16: Consideration of the possibility of organizing a special session of the Economic and Social Council or of the General Assembly on the problem of priorities.

22. The proposals in these recommendations were discussed extensively in CPC at its twenty-first session and recommendations concerning the intergovernmental machinery dealing with programmes and budgets were made by the Committee are now before the General Assembly. <sup>10/</sup> In particular, these recommendations relate to relationship between CPC and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the duration of the sessions of CPC, and, if accepted, would constitute partial acceptance of these two recommendations of the JIU report.

4. Observations and proposals on the CPC recommendations on the establishment of a monitoring unit

23. The CPC recommendations on the establishment of the Monitoring Unit are as follows: <sup>11/</sup>

"The Committee recommends that a central and independent unit should be made responsible within the Secretariat for monitoring the implementation of the commitments made by the Secretary-General in the programme narrative of the proposed programme budget for the delivery of output. The work of this unit should include (a) accurate determination of actual programme delivery to be reported in biennial programme performance reports and (b) a role, under official rules and regulations, in decisions involving any significant change in the intended output of a Secretariat unit ..."

"The resources for this monitoring unit should be provided through redeployment within the existing appropriations."

"The scope of the monitoring unit's responsibilities should apply to all activities covered by programme budgetary procedures undertaken by the United Nations, within the regular budget. The monitoring unit should have responsibility for all substantive activities in the political, economic, social, legal, humanitarian and public information sectors, and also activities in the common services sector."

<sup>10/</sup> Ibid., paras. 469-470.

<sup>11/</sup> Ibid., Thirty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 38.



24. The Office of Financial Services and the Office for Programme Planning and Co-ordination are the two offices whose mandates involve them at the central level in the actual formulation of the proposed medium-term plan and programme budget. These responsibilities require these units to have a thorough and complete knowledge of the work programme of the Organization in regard to the function of programme preparation. These units also share the responsibility for monitoring the implementation of commitments made in the proposed programme budget with the Office of Financial Services dealing with units in the political, humanitarian, legal, public information and common services sections and the Office for Programme Planning and Co-ordination concerned with the economic and social sectors. Such responsibilities have only recently been formalized in the manner envisaged by the recommendations. Programme monitoring is, in fact, one phase in the programme planning, budgeting, performance reporting and evaluation cycle. The first programme performance report was issued last year in connexion with the biennium 1978-1979 (A/C.5/35/1 and Add.1), and a performance report on the biennium 1980-1981 is currently being formulated on the basis of the programme narratives in the 1980-1981 budget. Since the programme narratives in the programme budget for the biennium 1982-1983 have been more carefully formulated in compliance with the guidelines on the identification of output set out in the Secretary-General's report on that subject to the General Assembly at its thirty-fifth session (A/C.5/35/2), it will be possible to report on actual programme delivery in precise terms for the 1982-1983 biennium.

25. While the Secretary-General agrees in principle, therefore, with the need to augment the functions of programme monitoring within the Secretariat, he believes that more consideration needs to be given to the proposal to establish a new central and independent unit. In particular, the concept of an "independent" unit requires further clarification in view of the fact that such a unit would still need to be integrated and located within the existing structure. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Committee of Governmental Experts to Evaluate the Present Structure of the Secretariat in the Administrative, Finance and Personnel Areas may, in the context of its review of responsibilities within the Secretariat in this general area, wish to address questions touching on the function of programme monitoring. The Secretary-General would wish to suggest, therefore, that definitive action on this recommendation await the outcome of the Committee's deliberations.