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Report on a rationalization of the proceedings and documentation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's General Conference

by

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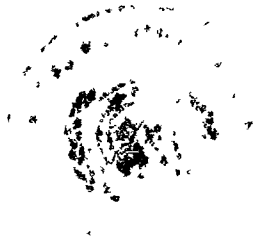

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Ad Hoc Committee of Experts to Examine the Finances of the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies (the Committee of Fourteen), in chapter IX of its second report (A/6343), took up the problem created by the growth of conferences. One of the heaviest burdens imposed on the organizations are the sessions of the legislative organs which are a source of increased expense to them and to the Member States which have to send delegations.

2. The Committee of Fourteen, in pursuit of its general aim of standardizing the practices of the specialized agencies, recommended (A/6343, para. 104(b)) that their legislative bodies should hold biennial sessions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) fulfils this requirement and convenes its General Conference every second year.

3. But this Conference, which is the longest of the legislative assemblies held by the larger specialized agencies, appears to encounter difficulties in efficiently discharging the responsibility assigned to it by the Constitution.

4. This was noted by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, which made the following recommendations in its "Review of the administrative and management procedures concerning the programme and budget of UNESCO" (A/6905, paras. 76-83):

> "(a) That the General Conference focus attention on its primary responsibility of determining the policies and the main lines of work of the Organization, as called for by the Constitution of UNESCO (article IV.B.2)
>
> (b) That the General Conference improve the method and content of its guidance in formulating directives for future programmes."

5. Recommendation (a) implies that the Conference, which should constitute the main source of guidance in determining the organization's policy, fails to concentrate on this task and disperses its efforts on the excessively detailed treatment of problems which, though important, could well be dealt with more expeditiously. Recommendation (b) explicitly calls for

a greater and more methodical effort by the General Conference to formulate long-term plans.

6. The analysis of the working methods of the Conference that follows will indicate many of the reasons why it is encountering difficulties in complying with recommendation (a).

7. With regard to ACABQ's recommendation (b), this has been a matter of special concern to the Director-General, who has never concealed his desire that the General Conference should devote part of its time to the provision of guidelines for long-term action. Thus, UNESCO has been the first of the specialized agencies to adopt, on the initiative of the Executive Board, the recommendation of the Committee of Fourteen (A/6343, para. 71) on the adoption of a six-year programming cycle (Resolution 33.1 of the fifteenth session of the General Conference).

8. Nevertheless, as will be seen later, the arrangements under which the General Conference operates make it impossible to achieve the best results in this respect at the present time.

9. This report sets itself two purposes which correspond to the objectives, in terms of general policy, which the Committee of Fourteen would like the members of the United Nations family to achieve, namely greater economy in the use of the funds placed at their disposal and greater efficiency in the execution of their activities. As applied to the General Conference of UNESCO, this means a rationalization of its working methods so that its deliberations become more purposeful and effective and its decisions be more in conformity with the task assigned to it by the Constitution. Such rationalization may also make possible a reduction in the duration and hence the cost of the Conference.

10. Unfortunately, it is not possible in a report of this nature to draw a clear distinction between a study of a reduction in the length of the Conference and a study on more effective deliberations: the two aspects of the problem are closely related and the recommendations which will be made are aimed, simultaneously, at contributing to both objectives.

11. It is equally impossible to recommend measures of rationalization without implying certain sacrifices which, it is to be hoped, will not be interpreted as affecting the Secretariat's praiseworthy desire that the practices of the Organization should be in a style consonant with the important tasks in which it is engaged or, in some cases, as curtailing the sovereign rights of Member States. Quite to the contrary, it will be noted in this last respect that certain recommendations, especially those relating to the documentation which the Executive Board submits to the General Conference, are intended to strengthen the role played by Member States, through the executive body, in the examination and implementation of the programme and budget prepared by the Secretariat.

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12. The arrangements for the General Conference are based on parliamentary techniques which correspond in broad outline to those applied in the United Nations General Assembly and the legislative meetings of the other larger specialized agencies. These techniques have been preserved more or less unchanged through the years, despite two factors: the growth of UNESCO's activities; and the fact that its programme, due to the wide range of subject matters it covers, is the most complex of the United Nations family.

13. The acknowledged need to improve or rationalize the working methods of the UNESCO General Conference led to the establishment after the twelfth session of an Ad Hoc Committee of the Executive Board to consider what changes should be made in the functions and obligations of UNESCO organs and what practical measures were needed to enable those organs to discharge their functions and obligations more effectively. In a working paper prepared for the Ad Hoc Committee (66 EX/AD HOC/2), which appeared in July 1963, the Chairman of the Executive Board said "that the General Conference was so inundated with documents and details that the smallest and newest delegations felt lost. In one or two important matters such as the budgetary ceiling, on which their votes were decisive, and in some matters of detail for those possessing special knowledge, they made their weight felt in the debates; in other cases most of those delegations can

have little influence on the outcome of the Conference as at present organized". Five years after this expression of opinion UNESCO has still not found lasting solutions to these problems.

14. The timely decision of the Executive Board to keep the Ad-Hoc (now called Special) Committee in operation is a praiseworthy step. The work accomplished by that Committee since its inception fully justifies this decision, for it has taken a realistic approach to the practical problems of a procedural nature for which the Executive Board has special competence. Its limited membership has given the Committee cohesion and enabled it to deal with its work in a businesslike fashion; recently its membership was increased from thirteen to sixteen and its terms of reference were extended to cover the study of important questions raised by the reports of the Director-General in connexion with the execution of the programme.

15. The Special Committee submitted to the Executive Board at its seventy-eighth session a report (78 EX/2) largely concerned with the organization of the General Conference's work and based mainly on a study of the replies of some Member States to a questionnaire (CL/1886).

16. The above report and the discussions held on it in the Committee, and afterwards in the Executive Board, reveal three main sources of concern:

(1) The need to rationalize the documentation which the Secretariat prepares for the Member States and which then serves as working material at the General Conference;

(2) The disproportionate workload placed on the Programme Commission - as compared to that of other organs - whose proceedings determine the length of the Conference session;

(3) The difficulties experienced by Member States and by the Secretariat in defining clearly what constitutes past, current and future programmes. These difficulties lead to the adoption of decisions which vary from one session of the Conference to the next with regard to the manner and forum in which these various phases of the programme should be tackled and discussed.

17. The three problems are interrelated. It will be seen that the disporportionate workload of the Programme Commission is largely due to the nature and volume of the documentation before it (including hundreds of amendments to the current programme and budget) which encourages unnecessarily long debates. It is also felt that the difficulties experienced in finding expeditious ways of organizing the discussion of the past, current and future programmes in the Programme Commission prevent this Commission from shortening its proceedings.

18. Bearing in mind essentially these sources of concern and in the light of the results achieved through the implementation of the Executive Board's recommendations at the fifteenth session of the General Conference, we shall now proceed to analyse its methods of work.

II. DURATION AND COST

19. The duration of the 1968 session of the General Conference obliged the delegations attending it to stay in Paris for five weeks; it consisted of thirty actual working days, including Saturday mornings except those preceding weeks which included a holiday. In the latter cases, Saturday was a full working day. By way of a comparison, the World Health Assembly invariably lasts three weeks and the International Labour Conference about three and a half weeks.

20. As a result, the fifteenth session of the General Conference cost $1,217,399. For the biennium 1969-70 the cost (estimated on the same basis, i.e. excluding expenses for the utilization of Arabic) is expected to be 11 per cent higher.

21. The UNESCO Secretariat has proposed that the sixteenth session open in the afternoon of 12 October 1970 and close in the afternoon of 10 November. To achieve this, however, it contemplates a schedule of meetings which involves treating Saturday as a full working day. Under this plan the usual thirty working days would be reduced to 25½ and the Conference would last four weeks and one day.

22. The direct saving to the UNESCO budget from a reduction of one day in the planned duration of a session is estimated at approximately $10,000. This represents the total costs for one day of all temporary staff (interpreters, translators, typists, clerks, etc.), plus a proportional reduction in overhead costs.

23. The corresponding saving for Member States in *per diem* for their delegations (calculated for 600 delegates at the current United Nations rate of *per diem* for France) might be of the order of $15,000 a day or about $105,000 for one week.

24. A week less spent at Headquarters, however, would not only represent an economic gain (an especially important factor for the delegations of developing countries), but would help meet the problem created for Member States by the undue length of time their representatives have to spend abroad. Thus it is sound practice for Ministers of Education and

senior officials to attend the UNESCO General Conference, and yet they cannot be expected to spend long periods away from their posts.

25. As the methods of work of the General Conference are at present conceived, it does not look as though the target of closing the sixteenth session on 10 November will easily be met. The difficulty of finding a way to reduce the number of meetings of the Programme Commission may be overcome to some extent by adopting certain measures which we shall consider later on. On the other hand, the agenda for the General Conference will be augmented by two items which may call for fairly lengthy consideration: (1) review of the first Development Decade, and (2) the contribution of non-governmental organizations to UNESCO's work (the latter item is taken up at intervals of six years on the basis of a voluminous document).

26. The daily work programme allows for a maximum of four organs to meet simultaneously, including a maximum of three organs with full membership. Even so, we believe that the Secretariat proposal for the opening and closing dates of the sixteenth session of the Conference, as approved at the fifteenth session, sets a target that should be attained.

27. However, we have serious doubts that many Member States will find acceptable the suggestion that Saturday afternoons should be treated as working time. True, this would save two days, since there are four Saturdays in the proposed period; but it would mean adopting a practice which has no parallel in the United Nations or the other larger specialized agencies. Thus, the World Health Assembly and the International Labour Conference do not normally meet on Saturday afternoons but treat public holidays as full working days. Legislative meetings require a considerable physical effort from the delegates and the Secretariat staff and a break of at least one day and a half is needed, if only to enable them to read the vast documentation before them.

28. On the other hand, we do not see why the inaugural meeting of the UNESCO General Conference should be held in the afternoon of 12 October, thus wasting half a working day. If the purpose is to have delegates meet beforehand to agree on certain arrangements, the opening session could start at 11.30 a.m.

29. Thus, if the four Saturday afternoons (two days) were subtracted from the working time and the morning of Monday 12 October was added to it, the number of working days would be 24 instead of the proposed 25½ and the delegates would spend only four weeks in Paris.

30. It is to be hoped that with the improvemonts in working methods under consideration by the Secretariat, plus the eventual suggestions of the Executive Board and those made in this report, the target of ending the sixteenth session of the General Conference in the afternoon or evening of 10 November will be met. This could save the Organization some $50,000, as compared to the previous session, which would mean an additional economy to the one achieved through the elimination of summary records; finally, a further saving could be achieved by drastic measures to rationalize documentation.

III. ABOLITION OF SUMMARY RECORDS

31. On a proposal from the Special Committee, the Executive Board recommended to the General Conference at its fifteenth session, and the Conference unanimously resolved, that the use of summary records of discussions held in commissions and committees be discontinued. The result of the discussions will be reflected in the reports of these organs, and the sound recordings of the statements made will be kept available in the archives of the Organization for those who would wish to consult them.

32. A word of praise for this decision is due to UNESCO, which has thus responded to a recommendation made by the Economic and Social Council and taken up in a report on documentation by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU/REP/68/5), by setting a most drastic precedent.

33. The decision, which will save the organization $70,000, was put into effect at the fifteenth session. It met with no adverse comment from delegations and caused no inconvenience worthy of mention.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

34. The cost of documentation accounts for a very high proportion of the total budget of the General Conference: of an estimated $1,527,174 for the biennium 1969-1970, $1,238,000, i.e. 81 per cent, relates to this item. (These estimates include expenses for the utilization of Arabic.)

35. We therefore feel that the rationalization recommended in this regard would result not only in a more effective functioning of the General Conference, but also in increased financial savings.

36. The Member States are supplied in connexion with the Conference with a variety of documents. These may be divided into four categories:

(1) Firstly, a set of basic documents submitted by the Secretariat or by the Executive Board, namely:

- C/1 Provisional agenda;
- C/2 Organization of work;
- C/3 Report of the Director-General on the first half of the second year of the financial period; also his report on the first year, which bears no symbol;
- C/4 Evaluation of activities and estimate of future prospects;
- C/5 Draft programme and budget;
- C/6 Recommendations of the Executive Board on the draft programme and budget;
- C/8 Amendments submitted by Member States to the draft programme and budget;
- C/9 Comments of the Executive Board on the reports of the Director-General.

(2) A second type of documentation comprises the reports of subsidiary organs; documents on specific projects or proposals; documents on particular administrative and budgetary problems; draft resolutions, etc.

(3) A third type consists of in-session documentation, in the form of draft resolutions submitted during the session; provisional records of plenary meetings, and the reports of organs.

(4) The last type consists of documents circulated after the Conference mostly in printed form, such as the volumes of resolutions; the records; the approved programme and budget; the reports of the Director-General, etc.

37. The Executive Board, in studying the methods of work of the General Conference, looked into the various problems created by the documentation described under (1) above and in particular by document C/5, i.e. the draft programme and budget. It took this step in response to an expression of serious concern by Member States, which have on many occasions voiced their misgivings about the presentation and the cost of this document ($105,648 for 15 C/5). We fully agree with this feeling and believe that its simplification may constitute a major contribution to increasing the efficiency of the Conference. We shall therefore examine it first.

(a) Document C/5: "Draft Programme and Budget"

38. While the presentation of the budgetary and statistical material in the annexes seems adequate, the examination of the body of this basic document is becoming more and more difficult, as far as the representatives of Member States who are called upon to study it are concerned. And this is not only on account of its steadily increasing length (document 15 C/5 had 940 standard pages, 220 more than 14 C/5).

39. C/5 is, of course, a technical document, but it should not be forgotten that the representatives of Member States who have to study it cannot follow the day-to-day work of the Organization as closely as the UNESCO Secretariat does, and that what is no doubt intelligible to the Secretariat, may be hieroglyphics for most delegates.

40. The detailed observations we have to make on document C/5 lay no claim to originality; the question has been dealt with at great length in UNESCO, and the need for major changes in layout was recognized in resolution 33.2 of the fifteenth session of the General Conference.