

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Substantive Session (Geneva, 30 June to 25 July 2003)

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is composed of 54 member States elected for overlapping three-year terms by the General Assembly, and meets annually for a four-week session, alternating between New York and Geneva. In 2003, its substantive session was held in Geneva. The ECOSOC's bureau for 2003 was composed of the following persons: President – Mr Gert Rosenthal (Guatemala); Vice-Presidents – Ms Marjatta Rasi (Finland), Mr Valery Kuchinsky (Ukraine), Mr Murari Raj Sharma (Nepal) and Mr Abdul Mejid Hussein (Ethiopia).

1. High-level segment

Each year, the ECOSOC devotes its first three days to a thematic discussion of a pertinent topic. The segment was attended by high-ranking government ministers and officials of international agencies. The high-level segment's topic for 2003 was: "*Promoting and integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development*". It aimed to refocus attention on the situation of those in rural areas and the importance of rural development for sustainable development as a whole.

Discussion during the high-level segment, and indeed throughout the substantive session, was driven by concerns over the downturn in the global economy and the approaching world trade talks in Monterrey, Mexico. In addition, the recent meeting of the G-8 countries at Evian, France, where the group committed itself to address the decline in aid money, was an important factor in the discussions.

The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in discussing his report to the high-level segment, emphasised that rural development was particularly affected by global downturns and the liberalisation of international trade. He stated that 900 million people (three quarters of the world's poorest people – defined as those living on less than a dollar a day) live in rural areas and depend for subsistence on agriculture and other rural activities. The Secretary-General highlighted that they are the most affected by drought, desertification and environmental damage.

During the high-level segment, a policy dialogue was held concerning rural development with the representatives of the international trade and financial institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There were also four open ministerial roundtables to discuss pressing issues in rural development: natural resources and rural development in developing countries; an integrated approach to implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in the area of rural development; global partnerships for rural development; and the rural/urban interface and the growth of slums.

The focus of most of the statements made by developing countries, in particular those of Morocco which was representing the Group of 77, centred on the need for developed countries to allow market access to developing country agricultural products and to increase spending on development aid. Other developing countries focused on the need to promote greater co-operation for development between developing countries, both in trade and aid. The European Union (EU) and associated countries, lead by Italy, stressed the need for an increase in development aid and the need to promote good governance, particularly in remote rural areas. The United States of America also highlighted the need to increase development aid, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and stressed the need to bring justice to rural areas.

Most speakers stressed the importance of taking an integrated, as opposed to piecemeal, approach to rural development and to consider all aspects involved, including: agricultural development, infrastructure, the empowerment of marginalized groups (particularly women), water and energy.

At the end of the segment a ministerial declaration was adopted. The declaration, in particular, calls for the reduction and elimination of agricultural subsidies and the opening up of developed country markets. Furthermore, according to Volume 2 – Number 3 of the ECOSOC newsletter, a UN public-private alliance for rural development was being developed during the segment as a response to the ministerial declaration aimed at encouraging business approaches that promote rural development as well as profitable investment in rural areas.

The theme for the 2004 high-level segment was also decided at the session. It will be "*Resource mobilisation and enabling environment for poverty eradication in the context of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010*".

2. Operational activities segment

The operational activities segment focused on the operational activities of the UN in the area of international development co-operation. The segment included a number of panels with high-level members of bilateral and international development agencies and with the Executive Heads of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and World Food Programme (WFP). A dialogue was also held with the UN country team for Senegal to assess the progress towards co-ordinated country-level action by UN development agencies through the United Nations Development Group (UNDG).

Members of UN agencies stressed the need for an increase in funding, particularly in the area of core/regular funding and called on donor countries to increase their spending. For their part, while supporting increased core funding in theory, most donor countries stressed the need for greater efficiency in UN activities in the development sector, particularly with regard to inter-agency co-operation. While supporting the efforts of UN agencies to improve the efficiency of their work, many donor countries questioned the true extent of this development with most efforts being directed at pilot projects (such as the one in Senegal).

3. Co-ordination segment

The co-ordination segment was devoted to the ways in which the ECOSOC can act to create the "*co-ordinated and integrated implementation of the outcomes of and follow-up to major UN conferences and summits*". The ECOSOC discussed this in light of the General Assembly resolution highlighting the important role of the ECOSOC in co-ordinating between the UN system, Governments and development groups, including civil society. This resolution recommended to the ECOSOC that it adopt by 2004 a detailed multi-year work programme on common conference issues at the co-ordination segment.

Most speakers recognised that the ECOSOC's performance in following up major UN conferences had been somewhat poor. They stressed that for the Millennium Development Goals to be realised there was an urgent need for the implementation of the goals and commitments made in the Monterrey International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Little progress however was made towards developing the requested multi-year work programme, although a resolution was adopted calling for informal consultations starting in early 2004 concerning this.

4. Humanitarian segment

Within this segment, discussion of humanitarian affairs was incurred with high-level members of UN agencies, Governments and civil society, particularly the *International Committee for the Red Cross* (ICRC). This discussion was primarily organised in three panels concerning: humanitarian financing and the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance; the transition from relief to development; and the impact of HIV/AIDS and other widespread diseases on

humanitarian relief operations.

In particular, the need for increased assistance in the transition from relief to development was stressed as this is a particularly difficult and neglected area. It was generally felt that this period can be extremely crucial time as there is a rapid change in the nature and quantity of available aid money and aid groups. Poor co-ordination at this time could easily move a country back to its status of needing humanitarian (relief) assistance.

The need to consolidate peace in conflict-affected areas was a particular concern as was the need for flexible funding of humanitarian agencies to allow for immediate and effective response to crises. Speakers were also concerned that the capacity of national Governments be developed and that more relevant partners be involved in the development of aid policy.

The resolution adopted for this segment called on the UN to improve and increase consistency in the assessment of humanitarian need and urged the Emergency Relief Co-ordinator to develop a system to track humanitarian financing. The resolution also called upon all parties to armed conflicts to comply with their obligations under international law and called on all States to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel. Finally, it stressed the importance of addressing the situation of least developed countries affected by armed conflict or natural disasters and improving their institutional capacity.

5. General segment

Unfortunately, due to backlog from the previous segments, little discussion was incurred on the wide range of topics to be addressed within this segment. This particularly affected the discussion on human rights-related topics, which was the most affected by the delays, coming at the very end of the session. The discussion of human rights was, therefore, extremely limited despite the number of topics on the agenda and was made even more so by long debates over a few resolutions, most notably the consideration of a resolution on the situation of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, a number of interesting resolutions were adopted during this segment.

The ECOSOC established a new ad hoc advisory group on Burundi. This body, like the body on Guinea-Bissau, will examine the humanitarian and economic needs of the country and will review relevant programmes of support to the country, eventually preparing a recommendation for a long-term programme of support. It will also give advice to the international community on effective assistance to the country.

In the field of human rights, the ECOSOC adopted several resolutions submitted to it by the Commission on Human Rights. This included a resolution suspending the consultative status of the NGO *Reporters sans frontières* (RSF) for its activities protesting the appointment of Libya as Chair of the Commission during its 2003 session.

Perhaps the greatest debate of the substantive session concerned debate over Commission on Human Rights Decision 2003/113 "*Enhancement of the functioning of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in regard to the operation of the mechanism of the Commission on Human Rights*". This decision (itself hotly debated in the Commission) requested the High Commissioner in particular:

"(b) To ensure that communications received or urgent appeals issued under the special procedures system are forwarded to the country concerned with written authorisation from the special rapporteurs, independent experts or working groups in accordance with the basic criteria and standards of admissibility existing in this connection;

(c) To discontinue the present practice of transmitting ex officio monthly lists of communications and their contents to other organs/bodies of the United Nations system, regardless of the nature or characteristics of these communications, unless express authorisation to this effect has been granted by the Commission and the Economic and Social Council".

Both of these decisions were vigorously debated by the ECOSOC leading to a number of votes on potential resolutions submitted by various members, including by the EU and its

associates and the Group of 77. The Group of 77 supported the adoption of this decision, while the EU in particular, felt that the measures would greatly hinder the ability of the High Commissioner and the special procedures to function properly.

Eventually a decision was reached and the ECOSOC adopted resolution 2003/58 by which it decided to postpone any decision on the transmission of communications and their contents until the Commission on the Status of Women concluded its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General regarding the future work of the Working Group on Communications on the Status of Women, while continuing with the present practice until such consideration has been completed. It did confirm however that communications and urgent appeals were to be forwarded to the concerned States under the authorisation of the special mechanisms.