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Review and Re-Appraisal of the Role and Functions
of the Economic and Social Council: Statement by the
Permanent Representative of Canada and Chairman of the
Canadian Delegation to the 38th Session of ECOSOC,
Ambassador Paul Tremblay, March 23, 1965.

After six years absence it requires a certain temerity to return to the ECOSOC stage to comment on the Council's role and functions. Canada has been out of the mainstream of the Council's developments during a period in which the whole structure of United Nations efforts directed towards economic and social development have changed beyond recall.

The review and reappraisal of the role and functions of ECOSOC now before us is one of the most important and most difficult items on our agenda this year. We have no grand plan, nor even specific proposals to offer at this stage. Indeed I think it would be ill-judged to do so because this is a subject which, more than most, will benefit by a preliminary and frank exchange of views. Any action which may flow from our debates here must emerge as the consensus of all the representatives around this table acting in the interests of the entire organization. No such consensus will emerge if we do not first probe each other's thinking and exchange suggestions offered with no commitment beyond the belief that they might possibly point the way to constructive revision and change. It is in this sense of thinking out loud that I make the following tentative comments. They represent the accumulated impressions of a country which has followed the Council's work with intense interest since the United Nations began but which, for the past six years, has witnessed its operations from the sidelines.

Every organization, every human enterprise, must stop periodically to take stock of the work it has done and the work it was set up to do. Otherwise it runs the risk of becoming stagnant or, even worse, superfluous to the society in which it exists. The immediate need to review and reappraise the work of the Council has arisen not only because of the passage of time. To a certain extent it is an inevitable result of our collective decision to establish as an organ of the General Assembly the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. This is perhaps the most important decision the United Nations has taken in the economic field in recent years. In our view, UNCTAD's establishment will have an effect on ECOSOC which will be profound and should be beneficial. If we do not revise ECOSOC's role and methods in the light of UNCTAD's establishment, we shall be shortsighted indeed.

The establishment of UNCTAD is part of a process which has gone on for many years within the UN system - the creation of a series of specialized expert bodies set up to address themselves directly and expressly to those economic and social problems which seem susceptible of international solution. Starting with the Functional Commissions, we have elaborated and refined this network within the United Nations itself to include the governing bodies of the specialized assistance programmes, the Committee for Industrial Development, the Advisory Committee on Science and Technology and now - the boldest gesture to date - UNCTAD. En route, we have made periodic changes in an effort to bring this burgeoning network into some sort of logical order; the Council has recommended the merger of TAC and the Governing Council of the Special Fund into one Governing Council for a unified United Nations Development Programme; the Commission on International Commodity Trade recently died a graceful and essential death, its functions taken over by UNCTAD.

We have seen, moreover, the development of what has been called the United Nations "family of organizations" - the Specialized Agencies, which have in recent years been drawn increasingly closer to the work of the United Nations itself, to the point where we might change our terminology to speak in future of the United Nations common system of organizations.

All these developments - with their common theme of increasing specialization - have reflected the changing needs of a changing world. It would be surprising if these changes did not signal the need for comparable changes in the role of ECOSOC itself. It would also be surprising if the founders of the United Nations, who endowed ECOSOC with its functions, had been able to see in any detail the role the United Nations would be required to play in economic and social matters 20 years later. In that 20 years, we have seen the urgent need for an assault on economic and social development emerge as the priority claim on the attention of ECOSOC and all the bodies which come within its orbit. The reasoned debate on emerging trends in the economic and social fields has been supplanted by the more urgent need to act. This is not to say that debate has become unnecessary, but rather to suggest that it must always be regarded as a prelude to action, to result, the debate which precedes it must necessarily be precise, informed and specialized - hence the establishment of specialized bodies.

As each specialized body has emerged, the Council has been able (or should have been able) to withdraw from what might be called the action debate in that particular field. The responsibilities for detailed action have been delegated to experts. This process has achieved a new level with UNCTAD; it would be absurd for 27 representatives to sit in these halls debating in all solemnity the trade requirements of the developing countries when a better qualified and larger body had made these needs its special concern. It should be with something very like a sigh of gratitude that ECOSOC hands over its detailed responsibilities in this field. The picture in other areas is no different. This Council has neither the time nor the necessary expertise to wrestle with the detailed planning required to make social development or international acceptance of human rights a working reality.

To say that the Council has no further detailed responsibilities in these spheres is not to say that it has no work to do. In fact its role has become both more complex and more difficult to discharge satisfactorily. In the first instance, it has a legislative obligation with respect to its Functional Commissions and subsidiary committees; the resolutions of these bodies must be approved as decisions of the Council if they are to take effect on an international level. Speaking for my own delegation, we think this task should be discharged with considerable restraint when it comes to revising the recommended texts, and with debate which avoids the temptation of merely recording once again national positions for the record.

Secondly, there will always be areas where action is required but which do not fall readily into the terms of reference of any of the specialized bodies. These areas will necessarily come under the direct jurisdiction of the Council, which will, by consequence, play the action role. Here, too, one would hope for a firm sense of perspective. There will be those topics which, essential in themselves, will not be of major importance when we draw up the balance-sheet of progress in the development process. Conversely, in other areas it may become clear that something more is needed than an annual and necessarily curtailed debate in the Council.

These responsibilities need not and indeed should not amount to the major work of ECOSOC. But when the urgent problems have been dealt with by the specialist subsidiaries, what remains to be done apart from the necessary job of electing the members of those subsidiaries, and ironing out conflicts in the annual pattern of conferences? To us it seems that the major and crucial role for ECOSOC will come in assessing and co-ordinating the efforts of the entire international community directed towards the process of development.

Development, both economic and social, requires expertise and sustained attention. By creating specialized subsidiaries, we have gone a long way towards meeting that need. In dealing with one problem, we have, however, created another - ensuring that the specialists work within some generally approved overall pattern without conflict or friction. If we are to make any sense of the notion of a joint effort or a common system, there must be some one body which attempts to assess the process of development in all its aspects. The job must be done, but why ECOSOC? In part because the United Nations itself as an agency is engaged in so many action areas directed towards the ultimate goal of development that it needs at all times to keep an eye on the nature of the forest. It is not enough to work on the theory that if you have many strong trees the forest will take care of itself. The United Nations is an agency, but not an agency like any other, and it is the Charter responsibility of this Council to advise the United Nations about what is going on in the economic and social fields.

None of this is new. Indeed the most significant developments in the Council's work in the past two years have taken place precisely in the field of co-ordination - the insistence on priorities and planning in the work of the Functional Commissions, the attendance of Council officers at meetings of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination, the continuing efforts to work out a coherent and comprehensible work programme for the United Nations, the compilation and codification of work completed or in

progress, the efforts to come to grips with evaluation of international performance. If the Council is to develop its role in this area - and we suggest that it be looked at as the major role - we should be clear about what we mean by the word "co-ordination".

Co-ordination is often seen as nothing more than a restraining function, the weeding out of marginal projects, the imposition of rules and procedures, the settling of jurisdictional disputes - in short, what might be called administrative co-ordination. Restraint from the centre undoubtedly has its part to play. Only at the centre, after all, is it possible to have some notion of the competing claims on resources. The limits of funds, personnel and even time available alone require someone, somewhere, to be in a position to reconcile these competing claims. We have all accepted this principle in our national governments; it lies at the very heart of planning and is the motive force behind the use of priorities. I do not think any of us would deny the same need for United Nations machinery.

But there is another, more vital, aspect to co-ordination - the appraisal of existing United Nations efforts with a view to identifying gaps, shifting emphasis and indicating new directions. In this sense, ECOSOC has a responsibility to serve as a focus for the thinking of the United Nations on the general questions which development poses and the policies which development demands. This aspect of co-ordination can go still further. The Council could be not only a focus for international thinking but a catalyst for international action where such action is required. In almost every case, that action will be put in train by some other body within the United Nations, a body specifically established and equipped to do the job, but the Council has a role to play in providing the stimulus.

Through the very variety of specialized bodies we have set up, we may be running the risk of a haphazard approach to economic and social development. We have redressed some inequalities but there may well be others. Are we, to take an example at random, placing sufficient emphasis on the application and adaptation of new technological developments to the needs of the developing countries? Is the United Nations system directing enough effort towards analysing the effects of demographic change? Is the current emphasis on agricultural production sufficient for the needs of self-sustained economic and social development? These are purely random examples; it may be that, in each case, no more emphasis, no change in direction, is needed at the moment. But it should be ECOSOC that keeps a watchful eye on the workings of our complex international machinery and signals the need for a drop more oil here or a bit more weight there as the need arises.

We recognize that there is some concern that a strengthened Council may intervene in the substantive work of the specialized bodies, both within the United Nations itself and within the United Nations system. There are particular fears that the Council might cut across the work of UNCTAD. In our view, the Council should not become engaged in any way in substantive operations. To use an industrial metaphor in an age of increasing industrialization, international machinery has been set up to produce certain results. It is no part of the Council's work to take over the production line. Rather its role must be to see that the machinery works smoothly, that the individual components

work together, and that the end products meet the needs of the international community. The governments represented around this table are the same governments represented in UNCTAD, in the Functional and Regional Commissions, in the standing committees, and in the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations system. Co-ordination within individual governments is our best guarantee of co-ordination on an international plane.

This role of co-ordination on the broadest of policy fronts is the role which we think the Economic and Social Council might develop for itself. It is both ambitious and difficult. Even under the most auspicious circumstances, it could not be achieved overnight, or even in the course of several years. Certainly, it cannot be brought into being simply by saying this is the way matters should be handled. Nonetheless, we think it is practicable and worth trying.

How is it to be done? The answers here are less clear-cut, but it may well be that some minor reforms in working habits could go a long way towards setting the stage. Particular emphasis might be placed on reducing the time spent on essentially minor functions. We may find that we need more sessions or fewer, the same sessional committees or a new framework for ordering our work. The techniques of re-tooling should emerge when we have the opportunity to discuss the question at greater length during the thirty-ninth session. Our major concern should not be to shore up the position of the Council for reasons of pride or conservatism. We are not here to preserve an institution but rather to use it to our common advantage.

The item now before us will be the subject of a continuing discussion throughout our meetings this year and at the twentieth session of the General Assembly. At this stage we are not irrevocably committed to any of the tentative suggestions which we have just put forward as part of a very preliminary exchange of views. Rather we want to hear the views and comments of others, all of which will play a part in fashioning the broad consensus which should ultimately emerge on the role and functions of ECOSOC.



