

BRIEF III. ECOSOC Guiding and promoting a coherent and coordinated UN system

Updated January 2024

This brief is part of a series aimed to provide background information on ECOSOC strengthening. Briefs include (i) ECOSOC mandates and evolution of functions; (ii) policy dialogue and guidance; (iii) guiding and promoting a coherent and coordinated UN system; (iv) subsidiary bodies; (v) relationship with the General Assembly, Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council; (vi) countries in special situations; and (vii) addressing emergency issues.

Why coordinate?

The UN Charter mandated ECOSOC to coordinate the work of the UN system, and this now encompasses the economic, social, health, environmental and related fields. ECOSOC is the platform where, through coordination, coherence of the UN system is to be achieved. The purpose of coordination is to avoid duplication, minimize redundancies and overlaps – and ensure synergies and co-benefits in the work of the system, particularly in policies and operations. This has been particularly important for ECOSOC's contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Decade for Action.

The Council is the preeminent UN mechanism for the coordination of the UN system and the range of work of UN system entities, including not only operational activities but also policy and normative work. The work of the UN system is highly decentralized, covering a wide range of different issues with entities having their own intergovernmental processes, constituencies and

agendas. UN funds and programmes are established by a resolution of the General Assembly with a focused mandate and are coordinated by the Council. For their part, the specialized agencies are international organizations working with the UN through agreements with the Economic and Social Council, pursuant to the terms of Article 57 of the Charter. Article 63 of the UN Charter stipulates that the Council may coordinate the activities of the specialized agencies through consultation with, and recommendations to, the agencies and through recommendations to the General Assembly and Members States.

«1946 - 1960s»

In the early years, ECOSOC exercised its coordination role of the specialized agencies and the IAEA by examining reports from these organizations and making recommendations to avoid overlap and duplication in their programme activities. As its agenda increased in volume and became more complex, ECOSOC created an ad hoc Working Group on Coordination (resolution 798 (XXX)) in 1960, which was replaced by the creation of the Committee on Programme and Coordination (CPC) in 1962 to identify issues and problems of coordination. Inputs to the discussions of the Council were derived from the report of the Secretary General on the work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), now known as the Chief Executives Board (CEB), the report of the CPC and the outcomes of the joint meetings of both the ACC and the CPC. The Economic and Social Council considers the annual overview report of the United Nations System Executives Board for Coordination and the Committee for Programme and Coordination under its agenda item on “Coordination, programme and other questions (a) Reports of coordination bodies”.

The Committee on Development Planning (CDP), now renamed the Committee on Development Policy, created in 1964, was also originally requested to help the Council in its coordination function by reviewing and evaluating the development programmes and activities of the UN and the specialized agencies.

«1990s and 2010s»

With 45/264 of 1991, a Coordination Segment was created alongside the High-level Segment and the Operational Activities Segment, as part of the substantive session of the Council, held over four to five weeks between May and July. Its objective was to review the work of the specialized agencies and bodies of the UN system in selected areas, in accordance with Articles 63 and 64 of the Charter. Soon after the Segment was also asked to address coordination matters arising from subsidiary bodies (48/162).

The Coordination Segment functioned as a space for examining the policy guidance/recommendations of the various agencies, funds and programmes in different sectors to ensure that they are consistent and mutually supportive in addressing global development challenges as defined by Member States. The Council could thus:

- help to improve the capacity of the UN system to provide more integrated solutions and enhance their effectiveness;
- provide guidance on the range of activities of specialized agencies, including normative and policy aspects.

- consider the implementation of the ministerial declaration adopted by ECOSOC the previous year by the UN system; and
- provide an opportunity to review the follow-up and implementation of the outcomes of specific conferences and summits based on cross-cutting themes.

The reforms ushered in by resolution 68/1 in 2013 discontinued the Coordination Segment, and a newly-created Integration Segment was tasked with consolidating all the inputs of Member States, the subsidiary bodies of the Council the United Nations system and other relevant stakeholders. The Integration Segment was also meant to bring together the key messages from the Council system on the main theme and develop action-oriented recommendations for follow-up. As part of the reform, the General Assembly also decided that the dedicated coordination and management meetings would be held regularly to perform functions of the previous coordination and general segments. Later, this was renamed as the Management Segment (A/RES/72/305). In 2018, the Integration Segment was also tasked to prepare the HLPF thematic reviews (A/RES/72/305).

«2020s»

With resolution 75/290A, the new ECOSOC Coordination Segment replaced the Integration Segment and the informal meeting of the Council with the Chairs of the subsidiary bodies. The new Coordination Segment has been mandated to take up coordination matters arising from subsidiary bodies, principal organs and specialized agencies in the economic, social environmental and related fields. It is also mandated to provide forward-looking policy guidance to ensure coherence and direction in the policies and normative work of subsidiary bodies and specialized agencies relating to the 2030 Agenda, as well as other aspects of the work of the Council. Through the Coordination Segment, the Economic and Social Council is envisioned to steer the Council system towards an efficient and integrated workflow throughout the ECOSOC cycle leading up to the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

«ECOSOC and International trade and finance institutions»

ECOSOC has also endeavored to promote coherence and cooperation with the international trade and finance institutions on issues of common concern. ECOSOC's regular engagement with the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) began with its high-level policy dialogue during its High-level Segment in the 1990s. ECOSOC also initiated, in 1998, a tradition of meeting each spring with finance ministers heading key committees of the Bretton Woods institutions. The collaboration with the BWIs increased during the preparations of the 2002 Monterrey Consensus and its follow-up. The economic and financial crisis of 2008 demonstrated the importance of strengthening the multilateral system with respect to global economic and financial issues and the critical role of global economic coordination and coherence. With the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Council's engagement with the BWIs has been strengthened by shifting these specialized discussions to the ECOSOC Financing for Development Forum in the form of a special high-level meeting of ECOSOC with BWIs, WTO and UNCTAD. The ECOSOC Bureau and the Boards of Executive Directors of the BWIs meet annually in Washington D.C. to discuss ways to strengthen cooperation and coordination between the UN and BWIs.

«Coordination of the UN development system operational activities»

ECOSOC is the preeminent UN mechanism for the governance, oversight and coordination of the UN development system (UNDS) operational activities through its operational activities for development segment (OAS). The Secretary-General reports annually to ECOSOC and the General Assembly on UN development system operational activities, funding and system-wide policy and commitments. The Deputy Secretary-General, as Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) reports annually and specifically on the Development Coordination Office (DCO), the management and results of the UN resident coordinator system, and the system-wide contribution of the UN development system to support countries' SDG achievements. Both the Secretary-General and the Deputy

Secretary-General engage in extensive dialogue with Member States at the Segment. Governing boards of UN funds and programmes also report to ECOSOC under the operational activities for development agenda.¹

In resolution 75/290A, the General Assembly reaffirmed existing functions at the time for the Operational Activities Segment to “serve as a platform to ensure and enhance accountability for, and acceleration of system-wide performance and results in relation to the 2030 Agenda and provide guidance to and overall coordination of the United Nations development system supporting General Assembly policies including the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the QCPR, including oversight of the implementation of the resolution on repositioning of the United Nations development system”. ECOSOC was also requested to reinforce linkages between policy and operational functions with the aim to strengthen results and impact. It was asked to provide improved system-wide coordination and guidance on operational activities for development to the governing bodies of the United Nations development system.

ECOSOC has regularly adopted annual resolutions on operational activities in follow up to the Segment. For its part, the General Assembly also adopts annual resolutions on operational activities, negotiated in its Second Committee. There may be scope for further strengthening the role of ECOSOC as a central governing body for the UN development system, including through further clarifying the respective responsibilities of the General Assembly (political guidance) and the Council (technical oversight).

The existing timing of the Segment is mandated by GA resolution 72/305. This has posed challenges in the preparation of the various reports as a result of the sequencing of the data gathering and analysis of QCPR surveys, and the survey completion by governments, UN system entities, RCs and UNCTs.

«Coordination of UN humanitarian assistance»

Through its Humanitarian Affairs Segment, the Council contributes to strengthening the coordination and effectiveness of the UN humanitarian assistance and support and complement international efforts aimed at addressing humanitarian emergencies, including natural disasters (A/RES/68/1). Resolution 72/305 acknowledges the necessary linkages and synergies between humanitarian action and development assistance and respective Segments and that the Humanitarian Affairs Segment adopts themes based on humanitarian considerations and that are coherent with the main theme of the Council. The Segment alternates between New York and Geneva.

The Humanitarian Affairs Segment is preceded by a one-day ECOSOC meeting on the transition from relief to development (established in resolution 75/290 A). The meeting is organized in the context of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment and the Operational Activities for Development Segment, without prejudice to the respective mandates of those segments. It addresses the linkages between humanitarian assistance and development assistance and may also discuss, inter alia, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. The meeting aims to build resilience and preparedness and improve the efforts of the international community to respond better to the transition from relief to development, and to deliver better results for improving the situation of countries on the ground through enhanced cooperation, collaboration and coordination, with the ultimate goal of resuming long-term sustainable development.

The Transition meeting focuses on countries in situations of conflict, post-conflict countries and countries facing humanitarian emergencies. The meeting also considers Council matters related to the Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Haiti, South Sudan, the Sahel region to guide coordinated support at the country level. The meeting includes participation by all relevant stakeholders, including, inter alia, the Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Chair of the Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Haiti, international financial institutions, regional organizations and civil society. As decided by ECOSOC, in [2022](#) the theme of the meeting was “Recurrent crises and sustainable solutions: building resilience and addressing rising food insecurity and displacement” and [in 2023](#) “Transition from relief to development: taking action to promote resilience, sustainable solutions and recovery in climate-related disasters and crisis contexts”.

¹ While all UNDS entities report collectively through the Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General reports, ECOSOC also includes an annual agenda item to receive the Reports of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund/ United Nations Office for Project Services, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and the World Food Programme and an associated interactive dialogue with Executive Heads of UNDS entities at ECOSOC OAS.