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ECOSOC'S REQUEST TO ITS SUBSIDIARY BODIES THAT CURRENTLY MEET ON AN ANNUAL
BASIS TO CONSIDER ADOPTING, ON AN EXPERIMENTAL BASIS, A BIENNIAL CYCLE ON
MEETINGS, AND TO REPORT IN 1984

NOTE

BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

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NOTE

BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

I. Introduction

In its decision 102 of 10 February 1984, the Economic and Social Council pursuant to General Assembly decision 38/429 of 19 December 1983 and Council resolution 1768 (LIV) of 18 May 1973, decided to request its subsidiary bodies that currently meet on an annual basis, to consider adopting, on an experimental basis, a biennial cycle of meetings. In general Assembly decision 38/429 on rationalization of the work of the Second Committee, the Assembly has *inter alia* invited the Economic and Social Council, pursuant to its resolution 1768 (LIV) of 18 May 1973, to request its subsidiary bodies that currently meet on an annual basis, to consider adopting, on an experimental basis, a biennial cycle of meetings. This invitation of the General Assembly was part of its decision to adopt, beginning at its fortieth session, a biennial programme of work for its Second Committee, apart from its general debate, and its recommendations and requests to some other standing Committees to consider adopting, on an experimental basis, a biennial cycle of meetings, in conformity with the biennial work programme to be established by the Second Committee. In section VII - Calendar of conferences of its resolution 1768 (LIV) of 18 May 1973 on rationalization of the work of the Council, the Economic and Social Council had decided that the calendar of conferences shall be so arranged that, *inter alia*, the Council's body responsible for co-ordination, the Committee for Development Planning, the Committee for Human Rights and its Sub-Commission, and the regional economic commissions meet every year unless any of these organs decide or have decided otherwise with the concurrence of the Council.

II. Background to Decision

It will be recalled that from the first session (29 December 1958 to 6 January 1959) to the seventh session (9 to 23 February 1965), the Economic Commission for Africa met on an annual basis. Then, in its resolution 130 (VII) of 22 February 1965 on sessions of the Commission, the Commission recommended that the sessions of the Commission should be held biennially instead of annually. In arriving at that decision, the Commission was influenced by its assumption that the need to intensify the work carried out in the subregions with a view to hastening subregional economic integration would lead to many meetings in the subregions, thus increasing the overall material and financial cost of all the Commission's meetings. Thus, between 1965 and 1979, the Commission met on a biennial basis.

At the fourteenth session of the Commission/Fifth meeting of the Conference of Ministers, the Conference of Ministers in Commission resolution 330 (XIV) on restructuring of intergovernmental machinery for development and co-operation in

Africa, which it adopted on 27 March 1979 it, inter alia, decided that "the meetings of the Conference of Ministers of the Economic Commission for Africa shall be held annually and the annual meetings shall be organized in such a way that alternate meetings shall, in particular, consider the programme of work and priorities of the Commission, which is examined at two-year intervals by the General Assembly, together with the Executive Secretary's biennial work programme, while the other meetings shall be held for a much shorter period in the years when the established major programme of work and priorities of the Commission is not being considered and shall consider such other matters requiring urgent attention, as the implementation of programmes and projects and resolutions and recommendations of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Organization of African Unity and the specialized and other agencies of the United Nations as they affect the work programmes of the Commission; issues of international significance affecting development activities in the African region and any matters which the Executive Secretary may submit for consideration". The Conference also decided that "the arrangements proposed above for holding annual sessions of the Conference of Ministers shall be established on an experimental basis and shall in due course be subject to review by the Conference of Ministers in the light of experience".

In this context, the request by the Economic and Social Council to its subsidiary bodies which currently meet on an annual basis, to consider adopting, on an experimental basis, a biennial cycle of meetings and report to it in 1984 is timely for the review of the 1979 decision. To assist the ministers in responding adequately to the ECOSOC request, some of the factors that led to the 1979 decision and other relevant factors which have arisen subsequent to that decision are given below.

As already indicated above, the Commission met every year between 1958 and 1965 and then every two years between 1965 and 1969. Even though its machinery was reviewed at its tenth anniversary in 1969 and the Conference of Ministers and an Executive Committee were created as legislative Organs of the Commission, with the Conference of Ministers representing the Commission when it is meeting, sessions of the Commission were still to be held every two years. In 1977, however, the General Assembly adopted resolution 32/197 on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system which requested inter alia that, taking into account the special needs and conditions of their respective regions, the regional commissions should rationalize their structures, inter alia, by streamlining their subsidiary machinery. It was in the light of this request of the General Assembly, based on the recommendation of ECOSOC that resolution 330 (XIV) was adopted in which inter alia the Conference of Ministers abolished the former Executive Committee and the Technical Committee of Experts, created the Technical Preparatory Committee of the Whole "to deal with the various matters submitted for consideration of the annual meetings of the Conference of Ministers" and decided that its meetings shall be held annually on an experimental basis.

While the request of the General Assembly to the regional commissions to stream-line their subsidiary machinery was responsible for the abolition of the Executive Committee and the Technical Committee of Experts and the creation of the Technical Preparatory Committee of the Whole, and the merger of the three separate Conferences of African Planners, Demographers and Statisticians into

one Joint Conference the basis of the decision by the Ministers to meet annually was deeper than the request from the General Assembly. In this connection, it should further be recalled that the ministers' meeting in 1979 was devoted mainly to the formulation and adoption of a "strategy for the African region in the international development strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade" which was later adopted as "Monrovia Strategy for the Economic Development of Africa" by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity at its sixteenth Ordinary Session in Monrovia, Liberia in July 1979, and to the formulation of the "Draft Declaration of Commitment of the Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity on Guidelines and Measures for National and Collective Self-reliance in Social and Economic Development for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order", which the Heads of State and Government also adopted at the same session, both of which are Annex A and Annex B respectively to Commission resolution 332 (XIV) on development strategy for Africa for the Third Development Decade, adopted by the Conference of Ministers on 27 March 1979.

In adopting resolution 330 (XIV) on restructuring of intergovernmental machinery for development and co-operation in Africa and deciding to meet annually, albeit on an experimental basis, the Ministers took into account the need to monitor on a regular basis the implementation of the Monrovia Strategy. This was because as indicated in the preambular part of resolution 330 (XIV), the Ministers recognized that the 1980s were likely to constitute a crucial decade for the Africa region, in view of the African approach to the international development strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade, as well as international negotiations and other significant issues affecting the economic and social conditions of Africa. Similarly, in the same resolution, the Ministers also decided that the Economic Commission for Africa shall continue to work closely in co-operation with the Organization of African Unity in the field of economic and social development and co-operation in Africa. In this regard, it is to be noted that the Organization of African Unity meets on an annual basis.

Since 1979, the need for close co-operation with the Organization of African Unity in the field of economic and social development and co-operation in Africa has been made more urgent by at least two factors - the adoption of the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos and the joint responsibility of the two organizations to monitor their implementation; and the deteriorating economic and social situation of the continent. Moreover, the recognition of the need to structure issues which the Ministers should be discussing annually in order to avoid long meetings and extremely unwieldy agendas led to the decision to meet annually. Another consideration which favoured the decision to meet annually is the very process of collective decision-making about international and co-operation and integration issues in the region. First, the Conference of Ministers as the supreme organ of the Commission is responsible for considering the decisions and recommendations of the sectoral conferences of Ministers such as Conference of African Ministers of Industry, Conference of African Ministers of Transport, Communications and Planning, Conference of African Ministers of Trade and Finance for Development, etc. all of which have a cycle of biennial meetings. Secondly, and finally, as the centre for general economic and social development within the United Nations system for the Africa region, the Commission and hence the

of the Conference of Ministers is the only continental-wide forum for discussing issues that come before such international fora for negotiations as UNCTAD, GATT, UNIDO, EEC-ACP, World Bank, and IMF without the need to negotiate with other regional groups in such fora and at the same time. Yet, these negotiations and others go on continuously throughout the year.

Conclusion and Recommendation

There is no doubt that those factors which led to a decision in 1979 by the Ministers to meet annually have not abated. On the contrary, the worsening economic and social situation in the continent definitely calls for more frequent meetings than once a year. However, in view of the costs involved it appears that the minimum number of meetings the Ministers could hold should be once a year.

Therefore, given the need to monitor regularly the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos, the current critical economic and social situation in the continent which demands consultations on a regular basis, the growing number of international negotiations calling for collective African positions, and the unique role of the Commission and hence the meetings of its Conference of Ministers to provide forum for discussing and formulating such positions, the Conference of Ministers may decide to continue to meet on an annual basis subject to the practice being reviewed at the Twenty-third Session of the Commission and Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of Ministers in 1988 when the Commission will be celebrating its 30th anniversary.