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Talking Points

Panel Discussion on

**“The Reform of the United Nations ECOSOC”
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Economic and Social Council**

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I. Reform for what purpose?

-- Three possible approaches:

- 1) To tinker, i.e., to once again adjust ECOSOC's working methods to increase efficiency and reduce redundancies;
- 2) To perform radical surgery, by recasting its purposes, capacities, and/or structure; or
- 3) To refocus some of its energies on core competencies and areas of comparative advantage.

-- As the Secretary-General has emphasized, reform is a process, not an event. Even the finest machine needs constant tinkering and fine-tuning, and ECOSOC is certainly no exception. But the members and bureau of ECOSOC are far better placed than outside experts to identify where such adjustments are most needed. And a good deal has already been accomplished along these lines to improve ECOSOC's performance.

-- Radical surgery, on the other hand, is neither feasible nor desirable at this point.

- 1) The two expansions of ECOSOC's membership, from 18 to 27 and then to 54, have left it in institutional limbo. It is too large for coherent priority-setting and too small to be fully representative of the organization's membership as a whole. It is axiomatic in the UN, however, that reform never shrinks membership bodies and further expansion would only make a bad situation worse.
- 2) It makes little sense, in my view, to try to create a parallel instrument to the Security Council on the economic and social side of the organization. Two attributes make the Security Council historically unique. One, it has restricted membership and special rights and responsibilities for major powers. Two, it has enforcement powers. Neither of these attributes seems apt for economic and social issues, at least at this stage of history. So I would not favor efforts to turn ECOSOC into either an Economic Security Council nor an Economic and Social Security Council. Besides, it would be substantively and programmatically distorting to imply that the world's pressing economic and social needs receive justification only through their impact on security.
- 3) The proposal to divide ECOSOC into an Economic Council and a Social Council is also misguided, in my view. One of ECOSOC's contributions through the years has been to enhance our understanding of the inter-relationships of the wide array of policy matters that fall within its competence. To try to divide them into two neat packages, it seems to me,

would go in the opposite direction that the results of inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral policy analysis would suggest.

- So my brief remarks today will focus on the third option of building on ECOSOC's core competencies and areas of comparative advantage.

II. ECOSOC needs to be rediscovered, not reinvented

- The Charter allots ECOSOC a range of important responsibilities, most of which appear to be even more critical today, in the face of globalization and an expanding UN system, than they were in 1945. ECOSOC's prime liabilities and shortcomings lie not with an overly narrow or outdated mandate, but with its inability to fulfill its founding vision.
- True, in Articles 63 and 64, the founders played ECOSOC a cruel trick by asking it to coordinate the work of the specialized agencies and then refraining from giving it the tools to do so. The functionalist leanings of the founders insured that the UN system would be highly decentralized, with the center having few carrots or sticks to induce or compel coherence within the system. Waves of well-intentioned and insightfully crafted reform efforts have failed to fully resolve this internal contradiction. Three clear lessons have emerged from this experience: 1) that agencies and programs need incentives to work together, not commands to do so; 2) that coordination and coherence, like reform, are long-term processes not discrete events; and 3) that at times and places the system can achieve impressive degrees of common effort toward completing well-defined and urgent tasks, particularly in the field. ECOSOC's leverage on such matters is bound to be modest, other than encouraging its members to work towards these goals in their service on governing boards of the agencies and programs.
- Articles 62, 65, 66, 70, and 71 define an intellectual and institutional bridge-building function for ECOSOC that could be immensely valuable and whose potential has never been properly tapped. Basically, ECOSOC is charged with the three key functions of dialogue, research, and idea production on the whole spectrum of "international, economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters" described in Article 62. ECOSOC's job is neither implementation nor enforcement. The Charter, moreover, places little value on ECOSOC's role as a resolution-producing machine.
- But by promoting dialogue across geographical and economic lines, as well as among governments, secretariats, and independent actors, and by identifying or mandating policy-relevant research and analysis, ECOSOC is unusually well placed to produce fresh ideas and innovative solutions to long-standing, but urgent, challenges to global public policy. This is where, in my view, ECOSOC's potential lies. Ideas can act as powerful magnets. They can also serve as bridges among diverse constituencies, especially if they are linked to a candid, focused,

and probing conversation of global proportions. So far, of course, these have not been the characteristics most often used to describe ECOSOC deliberations, nor to the policy research (if any) associated with them.

- Two of ECOSOC's attributes deserve special emphasis. One, it is one of the very few places where an ongoing North-South dialogue is possible on this range of issues. Countries at every level of development need such a sustained and wide-ranging conversation on the issues that affect the daily lives of their people. To waste such an unusual opportunity would be tragic. Two, governments are far from having a monopoly on influencing outcomes in these policy areas. In fact, in some of these sectors they are struggling to keep up with the private sector, NGOs, and transnational research and advocacy networks. It is an opportunity, not a burden, for ECOSOC to be the official entryway for these groups into the UN system.
- If ECOSOC could even begin to fulfill its Charter-granted potential, then all of the hand-wringing about its future and relevance would quickly fade away. Hopefully so too would some of the clamor about transforming it into something very different.

III. Some conclusions on building bridges and other things

- One. ECOSOC has made important progress on reaching out to NGOs and on instituting a high-level dialogue with the Bretton Woods institutions. Both efforts need ongoing nurturing and reinforcing. The more transparent, open, and flexible ECOSOC's work becomes, the more it will be able to capitalize on its inherent strengths as a convenor.
- Two. According to the Charter, ECOSOC is to assist both the General Assembly and the Security Council. While the latter has yet to understand the potential value of Article 65, in much of the world there is a growing appreciation of the linkages between economic and social development and the maintenance of international peace and security. The initial experiments in forming composite committees among the UN's principal organs deserve both careful study and concerted follow-up. The Security Council is overburdened, and its growing interest in thematic debates and resolutions should offer, over time, possibilities for closer cooperation with ECOSOC. Among the topics on which further understanding of their economic and social dimensions is needed are human security, prevention, nation-building, and terrorism.
- Three. Since ECOSOC should have more natural ties to NGOs, research centers, and academia than the Security Council, it should be well placed to encourage policy research by and dialogue with independent experts on the economic and social dimensions of peace and security. Such work, in turn, could be of value to

a new composite committee charged by the two Councils with tapping the policy-relevant analysis and ideas produced by such independent groups.

- Four. The members of ECOSOC should reassess the value of regional groups in its work and that of its subsidiary bodies. While organizing the inter-governmental work of the UN along regional lines may have simplified the process of negotiating texts and choosing candidates for membership in various bodies, it has also given a false sense that the issues on the organization's agenda can best be understood along regional lines. Such is certainly not the case for most of the issues addressed by ECOSOC, which have a global or trans-regional character. Sometimes it is within regions that the most distinct perspectives arise. The emphasis on regional groups, moreover, tends to discourage the kind of North-South and trans-regional bridges that ECOSOC should be in the business of building.
- Five. The Commission on Human Rights is becoming an acute embarrassment for the UN system as a whole. Before it becomes any more dysfunctional, ECOSOC, its parent body, should undertake to return the Commission to again being a locus for the advancement of human rights, not for rationalizing or papering over their abuse.
- Six. Rather than seeking a metamorphosis into becoming a Security Council clone, ECOSOC might well consider the various proposals for creating a small but representative steering committee to help guide its work and its interactions with other principal organs, agencies and programs.

None of these proposals would qualify as radical reform. Instead, they seek to build on ECOSOC's special convening powers and to reassert its potential for becoming the UN's dynamic engine of ideas in the economic and social realm.