

UNITED NATIONS

**ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN - ECLAC**



Distr.
GENERAL

LC/G.2009(SES.27/5)
11 March 1998

ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

Twenty-seventh session
Oranjestad, Aruba, 11-16 May 1998

**GENERAL REVIEW OF THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS
BY THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL:
THE CASE OF ECLAC**

Note by the secretariat

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The adoption of resolution 52/12 by the General Assembly on 12 November 1997, in which the Assembly calls upon the Secretary-General to implement the reform measures proposed in his report entitled “Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform” (A/51/950), was an important step forward in the intensification of the Organization’s reform process and laid the foundations for the overall analysis of the Secretary-General’s recommendations to be undertaken by the Member States.

One of the Secretary-General’s recommendations is that the Economic and Social Council initiate a general review of the regional commissions in consultation with other regional bodies and Governments, bearing in mind the individual reviews which each commission has already conducted. This mechanism is intended to ensure that the member States of each commission will take an active part in reviewing its operations, identifying its core competencies *vis-à-vis* global bodies and other regional and subregional intergovernmental bodies, and evaluating the most appropriate division of labour in each case.

In response to this recommendation, the ECLAC secretariat has prepared the following note as an input for the analysis to be carried out by the States members of the Commission. A brief outline is provided of the progress made in promoting interaction between the member States and the secretariat, coordination with the specialized agencies and with the United Nations system as a whole, and cooperation with other intergovernmental bodies in the region.

ECLAC and the reform of the United Nations

The most recent deliberations and resolutions of the General Assembly have given continuity to the steps taken over the past few years. For example, during its fiftieth session, in 1995, the General Assembly adopted resolution 50/227, entitled “Further measures for the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields”. In the portion of that resolution dealing with the regional commissions, the General Assembly states that the Economic and Social Council shall provide for the review of the regional commissions, with a view to strengthening and enhancing their effectiveness as action- and policy-oriented bodies in the economic and development fields with better response to the conditions and environments unique to the specific regions; improving their coordination with the entire United Nations system, including the specialized agencies, the Bretton Woods institutions and the regional development banks; strengthening their active participation relating to the implementation at the regional level of the results of major United Nations conferences; and encouraging them also to undertake their own management and functional assessments towards these ends in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of these bodies by

eliminating unnecessary duplication or overlapping of work and by ensuring a better structural relationship among these bodies and with the Economic and Social Council.

In accordance with this mandate from the General Assembly, in its resolution 1996/41 the Economic and Social Council requested that the regional commissions continue undertaking their own reviews. In the case of ECLAC, such a review process had actually been initiated several months earlier. In fact, at the twenty-sixth session of the Commission the secretariat had submitted a document entitled "Reform of the United Nations and its impact on ECLAC" (LC/G.1899(SES.26/4)) which provided a frame of reference for the effort to adapt ECLAC to changing circumstances both within the United Nations and in Latin America and the Caribbean. This document also set forth proposals intended to heighten the Commission's relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, to clarify its institutional identity and purpose, to set priorities within the programme of work on a more exacting basis, and to enhance its productivity, responsibility and accountability.

Following a wide-ranging debate on the subject, the Commission adopted resolution 553(XXVI), in which it formulated the most comprehensive official statement of recent years regarding the functions of ECLAC. In that resolution, the Commission offered an updated description of its mission, declaring that ECLAC should function as a centre of excellence charged with collaborating with member States in a comprehensive analysis of development processes geared to the design, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and the resulting provision of operational services in the fields of specialized information, advisory services, training and support for regional and international cooperation and coordination.

This statement represents the latest stage in an ongoing process of adaptation to new circumstances which has enabled ECLAC to maintain the cogency of its theoretical work in terms of the region's priority development issues, as well as making it possible for the programme of work's contents and scope to evolve over time, for qualitative changes to be made in the way ECLAC interacts with the Governments of its member States and for the secretariat's management style and its relationship with the rest of the United Nations system to be modified.

The contribution represented by the Commission's pioneering work in development economics is widely recognized in Latin America and the Caribbean, as are its ongoing efforts to update its proposals in order to ensure that they are in step with changing conditions in the region and elsewhere. Particular importance has been attributed to the fact that, in conjunction with the formulation of its proposal for changing production patterns with social equity, which serves as an overall frame of reference for its work, ECLAC has undertaken the necessary theoretical analyses to allow it to develop an institutional position regarding the major issues facing the region, such as the external debt and the structural adjustment process of the 1980s and the globalization process and public policy reforms of the 1990s.

With regard to the interaction between the secretariat and the member States, resolution 553(XXVI) establishes an ad hoc working group open to all ECLAC member countries which, in consultation with the Executive Secretary, is empowered to define priorities for the work

programme and recommend to the Commission strategic directions for its future activities, taking into account the development priorities of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as budgetary considerations.

The accomplishments of the ad hoc working group have laid the foundations for a new avenue of collaboration between the Commission and the secretariat. Its deliberations have been extremely constructive both in terms of improving the content and scope of the work programme and in other areas of the reform process.

In the sphere of organization and management, since the start of the 1990s ECLAC has been making a determined effort to increase the secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness by streamlining its organizational structure, cutting costs, improving its programming functions and promoting greater accountability. Its progress in these areas was one of the factors leading up to the Secretary-General's selection of ECLAC, along with the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV) and Conference Services at Headquarters in New York to test the pilot management scheme outlined in the document, "Reform of the ECLAC management scheme: delegation of authority and accountability. Note by the secretariat".

ECLAC and the specialized agencies of the United Nations

The United Nations, and its regional commissions in particular, are well positioned to contribute to the twofold task of promoting regional cooperation while reconciling it with the demands of multilateralism and international cooperation, two of the basic principles of the United Nations Charter.

The five regional commissions of the United Nations have undertaken a joint analytical effort which, in addition to underscoring the cost advantages to be derived from the direct provision of technical assistance and the compilation of information on a decentralized basis, has enabled them to work towards identifying those areas in which they are able to carry out the tasks of the Organization more effectively and efficiently than other bodies or units. Aside from the commissions' physical proximity to the member countries, some of their substantive advantages in this respect are their multidisciplinary character and the close contact they maintain with the relevant Governments.

Within this context, and in response to the General Assembly's call for improved coordination between the regional commissions and the entire United Nations system, including the specialized agencies, in its resolution 553(XXVI) the Commission instructed the Executive Secretary to intensify consultation and strengthen cooperation and coordination with other United Nations organs, agencies and programmes, particularly the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund, taking special care to avoid duplication of activities.

ECLAC has a long tradition of cooperation, not only with the institutions named in the resolution, but also with virtually all the specialized agencies and organizations of the United

Nations system which are active in the region. This cooperation has evolved within the existing regional and institutional context but its principal source of synergy continues to be the blending of the Commission's analytical capabilities with the operational experience gained by these institutions. In recent years the number of joint activities has declined, but efforts are being made to re-establish a level of cooperation that will meet the needs of our region.

As part of this effort, in May 1995 ECLAC convened an interagency meeting of the bodies represented on the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). The participants indicated that the meeting had played a very useful role in facilitating an exchange of ideas and information about the programme of work. They also emphasized the need to maintain an ongoing working relationship and, in accordance with that recommendation, the Committee members have continued to meet since that time.

A note prepared by the ECLAC secretariat concerning the interagency meeting cites numerous reasons for organizing a consultative forum at the regional level, especially in view of the fact that many of the bodies in the system conduct activities of a regional scope as a means of complementing their work in the national and global spheres. It also makes the point that, within the United Nations Secretariat, the regional commissions are the clearest expression of this approach, although United Nations programmes and most of the specialized agencies also carry out regional activities, which they direct either from their respective headquarters or from field offices.

This note divides up the tasks of the United Nations into four generic categories: (i) consensus-building within the many forums of the Organization based on its ability to act as a rallying point for a wide range of national actors; (ii) compiling, processing, interpreting and disseminating information; (iii) carrying out the theoretical work necessary to lay the foundations for action; and (iv) providing technical advisory services to developing countries, including both direct assistance and various other services in specific areas.

While acknowledging the fact that the institutions of the system conduct activities in all four of these areas, the secretariat notes that the relative weight of each category varies from one body to the next. United Nations programmes and specialized agencies tend to concentrate on providing technical services, whereas ECLAC focuses much of its attention on its analytical work. All of these tasks can be shared in such a way as to help enhance the relevance of the system's activities as a whole. For example, operational activities are more productive when they have a well-defined conceptual framework, while the Organization's theoretical work is greatly enriched by its operational activities and by the advantage of having access to the development experiences of virtually every country in the world.

The point is then made that the work done in each of these areas can serve to promote a more rational distribution of work and greater coordination. Theoretical work, for example, is conducted by various bodies on a more or less isolated basis. Precise guidelines do not always exist for the prioritization of these types of activities or for ensuring their relevance for policy-makers. Along the same lines, the provision of technical services to the Latin American and

Caribbean countries, as well as to the region as a whole, would stand to benefit from improved coordination.

The links which ECLAC has maintained with the specialized agencies ever since its founding are based on the complementarity of the individual organizations' objectives and their comparative advantages in terms of specific regional activities. Generally speaking, the Commission has contributed its multidisciplinary perspective on the issues under consideration, its database and its institutional position on macroeconomic and social questions, while the agencies have contributed their sectorally-based and specialized knowledge. The complementary nature of their areas of expertise has also enhanced the joint ability of the Commission and of the various agencies and programmes to secure the participation of prominent experts in the intergovernmental meetings and seminars which they organize.

Another area in which there has been a great deal of coordination and collaboration between ECLAC and other United Nations and regional bodies has been the preparatory work leading up to the international conferences convened by the Organization and the follow-up to the agreements adopted at those meetings.

More specifically, in its capacity as a forum for regionwide consensus-building, ECLAC played an essential role in supporting the Governments' efforts to formulate joint proposals in preparation for the World Summit for Social Development, the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women. ECLAC conducted a series of preparatory activities for the Summit which culminated in the adoption of guidelines for a Latin American and Caribbean consensus position with regard to the World Summit for Social Development in April 1994. In connection with the other two conferences mentioned above, ECLAC organized regional preparatory meetings which led to the formulation of the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Plan of Action on Population and Development and the Regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, 1995-2001.

Subsequently, in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Organization of American States (OAS), Latin American Economic System (SELA), World Health Organization-Pan American Health Organization (WHO-PAHO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ECLAC organized the first Regional Conference in Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development, which was held in São Paulo, Brazil, in April 1997. On that occasion the participating Governments adopted the Consensus of São Paulo, in which they assessed the social situation in the region as it stood two years after the Summit was held and reaffirmed their commitment to the objectives agreed upon at that time.

The seventh Regional Conference on the Integration of Women into the Economic and Social Development of Latin America and the Caribbean was held in Santiago, Chile, in November 1997. The Santiago Consensus, which was adopted at the conference, sets forth recommendations for attaining greater gender equity.

ECLAC and regional institutions

As part of its effort to reduce any duplication or overlapping of its work with that of other regional and multilateral organizations, ECLAC has focused on the need to adapt the operations of intergovernmental and subregional institutions to the present and future demands of the region. The context within which the Commission functions has changed significantly in recent decades with the creation of a large number of national, subregional and regional entities that pursue activities of a similar nature. ECLAC remains in a unique position, however, since it is still the only institution which is devoted to a systematic analysis, from a regional perspective, of issues having a bearing on the development of all the Latin American and Caribbean countries and which combines its work in that area with the provision of operational services and activities in support of regional and international cooperation.

As an integral component of the United Nations system and of the network of institutions working in the area of international and regional cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC appears to hold a comparative advantage in promoting international collaboration and action to ensure the complementarity and compatibility of regionalism and multilateralism, as well as in harmonizing cooperative efforts at the regional and world levels by integrating the two perspectives.

ECLAC has done a great deal to strengthen intraregional cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean. The region has a strong tradition of cooperation at this level, and the process is now gaining even greater momentum. In addition to serving as a sounding board and as a catalyst for debate on a wide range of development issues, ECLAC has furnished technical services to the secretariats of regional and subregional integration mechanisms, has fostered technical cooperation among developing countries, has served as a liaison with global forums and has facilitated the region's participation in those forums.

ECLAC has maintained close institutional relations in the field of cooperation with OAS, IDB, SELA, the Central American Integration System (SICA) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

Ever since its founding, ECLAC has recognized the need to coordinate its work with the economic and social activities conducted by OAS. The nature of the coordination between the two bodies has varied over time as the priority assigned to activities in these fields within the OAS programme of work has changed. It was particularly intensive during the 1960s, when OAS was playing a leading role in the economic and social development of the region; later, even when that role was reduced, an active exchange of information was maintained in order to avoid any duplication of work. More recently, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 49/5 of 21 October 1994 on cooperation between the United Nations and the Organization of American States and in response to the formulation, within the framework of the Summit of the Americas, of a new hemispheric agenda focusing on economic and social issues, ECLAC has intensified its

collaboration and coordination with OAS, principally in the areas of social policy, statistics and economic integration.

On 20 April 1996, ECLAC and IDB signed an agreement establishing a formal framework for the many cooperative activities which the two institutions have been conducting for a number of years now. These activities, too, have been reinforced in accordance with the new hemispheric agenda, which has also provided a context for the activation of a tripartite cooperation mechanism devised by OAS, IDB and ECLAC. Under the cooperation agreement, IDB and ECLAC will coordinate their efforts in certain areas with a view to establishing shared objectives, exchanging information and jointly analysing strategies for action. The agreement provides for the exploration of available options for cofinancing studies, projects and programmes in the areas of economic integration, intra- and interregional trade, population, statistics, public safety, social policy, macroeconomic policy, transport and the environment.

Since the founding of SELA in 1975, SELA and ECLAC have collaborated in a number of different areas. ECLAC has prepared specialized studies on various topics as a means of backstopping activities conducted by SELA, particularly in the fields of social policy, industrial policy and international trade. The Commission is also in charge of coordinating the preparation of the report on cooperation between the United Nations and the Latin American Economic System which is to be submitted to the General Assembly by the Secretary-General.

The Commission has been collaborating with the Permanent Secretariat of the General Treaty on Central American Economic Integration (SIECA) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) to promote Central American integration ever since the early 1960s. Recently, as part of the Support Programme to Strengthen and Rationalize the Institutional Structure for Central American Integration, ECLAC drafted five reports that together constitute a proposal for adapting existing institutional capabilities to the newly emerging needs of the subregion and to challenges to be met as part of the integration process. These studies, which were funded by IDB, served as the basis for the second Panama Declaration, which was issued in July 1997. In that declaration, the heads of State of the Central American countries reaffirmed their commitment to greater integration and, in particular, to strengthening its underlying institutional structure.

Ever since the creation of CARICOM, ECLAC has collaborated closely with that body. This ongoing relationship led to the signature, in March 1997, of a formal cooperation agreement providing for a series of joint activities and for the exchange of information in order to intensify the ties between the two organizations and avoid a duplication of effort. One of the areas in which joint activities have been conducted is the follow-up to the agreements reached at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

The above-mentioned activities attest to the fact that the States members of ECLAC have placed a great deal of importance on collaboration with other institutions over the years in response, in large part, to the concerns expressed in this regard by the General Assembly in its deliberations and resolutions.

The Governments of the member countries have defined the Commission's mission in great detail and have laid down very clear guidelines regarding the intensification of cooperation and coordination with its counterparts within the United Nations system and in the region with a view to optimizing the many synergies engendered by an appropriate division of labour and form of complementarity while at the same time minimizing any duplication of effort that might occur.