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THE PROBLEM OF ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND  
LIMITED RESOURCES

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1. In the last fifth of the twentieth century, in a world which achieved the most spectacular technological progress in history, there are signs of a widespread inability (of varying intensity) to resolve serious problems besetting vast sectors of the whole world's population. Uneasiness is very apparent in the projections for this final stretch in mankind's journey to the year 2000. It is already known that the poor will still be with us by the millions; that there will not be enough food to meet their most basic needs; that there will continue to be an insufficient number of jobs; that inflation may give rise to serious disturbances in both developed and developing countries; that the dynamics of growth may be affected by a world climate of crisis and confrontation; that the production structure is based on an energy system whose permanency is in serious doubt; and that in many countries this has meant and will continue to mean serious balance-of-payments crises, which will be temporarily overcome at the high cost of a dangerous external indebtedness and (without claiming to be exhaustive) increasing environmental pollution and all kinds of stumbling blocks stand in the way of precariousness of human settlements. The achievement of such social aspirations as more education, health services for everyone; an adequate diet for those who suffer from hunger; adequate minimum housing and the full integration of women in development. All this is part of a long list of needs, whose satisfaction will require something more than mere expressions of good will and understanding.

2. This fragmentary statement of problems reflects a complex situation calling for urgent action which is becoming especially important for the region of concern to us, with the emphasis on those countries with less economic potential and therefore greater social vulnerability. The current situation is such that, as a result of the difficult world economic situation, even large and powerful developed countries are beset by new problems and are having difficulty in solving alone the complex riddles of the universal dilemma in which we are immersed.

3. To be of help in solving these intricate problems, we cannot rely solely on the efforts of the major world centres. The only sensible course will be global co-operation among all countries, great and small, and an unprecedented commitment on the part of the international community to working towards

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common objectives, shouldering each others' problems as though they were our own. The world and the regions comprising it are becoming so interdependent that no one can stop worrying about a serious problem affecting mankind simply because he thinks that it is occurring far away or that it does not concern him. In the end, the interaction is such that the repercussions fall on all countries in the international community.

4. The United Nations is precisely the sounding board for large and small problems relating to war and peace and to the needs of countries or of segments of the population within countries, especially the most vulnerable ones, whether they are made up of men, women, the elderly, young people or the disabled. The great breadth of the world spectrum in which the Organization must operate and the variety of problems and circumstances which are its responsibility make its role a difficult one. However, the fact of its being a system with sectoral and regional bodies means that it can tackle the many facets of the problems presented by the modern world with a certain amount of proximity, which is essential.

5. The regional focus brings the Organization close to the decision-making centres of the governments of the countries which make up the region, and this results in a more realistic vision and a deeper understanding of the problems affecting the environment in which the secretariat of the regional economic commission must work.

6. The extensiveness of the varied constellation of factors which have burst upon the world scene and their impact on the economic, social, political and cultural life of the region have led the higher legislative organs of the system, such as the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, to assign more responsibilities to the regional commissions as part of a process of restructuring the economic and social sectors of the United Nations System with the basic aim of greater efficiency within an organization which, on account of its size, cannot tackle some subjects from the centres without jeopardizing the effectiveness of its action.

7. This restructuring has had the political support of the Governments and has resulted in a qualitative and quantitative change in the activities of the regional commissions, which, in General Assembly resolution (32/197),

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were declared to be "the main general economic and social development centres within the United Nations system for their respective regions", for both programming and their operational activities.

8. It was also decided in this resolution that "in order to enable them effectively to discharge the responsibilities indicated... the necessary authority should be delegated to the regional commissions and, to the same end, adequate budgetary and financial provision should be made for their activities".

9. Before we proceed to other considerations, attention should be drawn to what has happened in recent years in terms of the allocation of responsibilities to the regional commissions and the machinery through which many new duties have devolved upon them.

10. In the past decade, concern for a variety of problems led the United Nations to use its powers to convene major world conferences to deal with problems all of which affected the international community and which could be solved only in a broad spirit of international co-operation. The conferences thus convened include those on the environment (1972), population (1974), food (1974), human settlements (1976), the integration of women in development (1975), water (1977), desertification (1977), science and technology for development (1979), new and renewable energy sources (1981), technical co-operation among developing countries (1978) and the regular UNCTAD sessions and the General Conferences of UNIDO. Various international years, in connexion with children, youth, and the disabled, have also been celebrated. All these meetings gave rise to mandates which greatly extended the Commission's sphere of activities, both in the preparation of the technical documentation for them and in the organization of preparatory regional meetings. Furthermore, some of the world conferences produced plans of action in which the regional commissions were assigned special responsibilities. In some cases, specialized institutions were set up, whose legislative bodies frequently, in the course of their activities, assign responsibilities and tasks to the commissions with no corresponding provision of resources for carrying them out efficiently.

11. It should be pointed out that, in addition to a wide variety of assignments (in fields in which the commissions had no previous experience), resulting from the conferences referred to in the preceding paragraph, it was

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necessary to take on important activities in connexion with economic co-operation among developing countries. In 1976 a conference of the Group of 77 was held on the subject, and later, in 1979, a fourth ministerial meeting of the Group of 77 was held in Arusha. Both meetings were major forums which produced a large number of recommendations for action by the regional commissions.

12. Where regional questions are concerned, the existence of a number of bodies dealing with integration and working in special fields of over-riding importance created a need for technical support from the secretariat, increasing its responsibilities to the governments in the region. In addition to older bodies, such as LAFTA, CACM, CARICOM and the Andean Group, to which co-operation in the form of advice is permanently made available, the establishment of SELA in the field of integration and of OLADE in the field of energy, called for a large amount of work in both those fields in respect both of contributions to the definitions of Latin American positions at world conferences and assistance in the exploration of serious problems produced in many Latin American countries by the world energy situation. In addition, co-ordination has been greatly intensified both within the United Nations System and with other regional bodies, such as OAS; and this requires a substantial effort in terms of finances and technical resources.

13. The growth in the number of issues debated in the various forums which results from this variety of concerns on the part of governments has undeniable positive aspects, and is respected by the secretariat since it corresponds to the political will of the member governments. It also gives the secretariat a broader interface in its contacts with Governments and new segments of public opinion, and because it is dealing with new people, its field of action in respect of co-operation is broadened.

14. It should also be pointed out that not only is the secretariat assigned tasks by various intergovernmental bodies such as the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and other central organs which operate at various levels within the System, but it has what we might call a primary obligation in connexion with the responsibilities assigned to it by its own legislative bodies (the Commission and its subsidiary organs - the Committee on Central American Economic Co-operation and the Caribbean Development and Co-operation

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Committee (the most recently created body - Chaguaramas, 1975)), which are composed of a group of countries which have a preferential claim on the attention of the secretariat in its co-operation programmes, and which the latter should be in a position to provide with the maximum amount of support.

15. These numerous mandates, which cover a broad spectrum of issues and a vast geographic area, have resulted in new demands which the secretariat has tried to meet; but they require much diversification in its programme of work and a resource allocation which in many cases does not come up to the minimum amount needed.

16. This whole process of enlarging the programme of work is not taking place at a time when the Organization is enjoying a financial boom. On the contrary, it is happening within a framework of such drastic belt-tightening that, as a result of the decision taken by the Organization's main financing countries, both the budget now in preparation (1982-1983) and the one preceding it, which covers the years 1980-1981, were drawn up under instructions for zero growth of resources.

17. Despite all these responsibilities, it should be pointed out that in the period between 1972 and 1981, professional staffing in substantive fields covered by the regular budget increased by only 20 technical posts, or at an average rate of two professionals a year, a figure which appears all the smaller when compared with the number of new tasks assigned by all sources, as pointed out in the preceding paragraph.

18. The results of the process of restructuring the System, approved in December 1977 in resolution 32/197, have been limited and so far consist only in three professional posts in the fields of transport, water and social development which were released to us by DIESA and DCTC as part of the decentralization effort. Negotiations are still underway, but it is impossible to think that resources will be obtained in sufficient quantity to enable us to undertake permanent activities of a complex nature in such diverse fields and such an extensive and varied geographical area.

19. To deal with this situation, the secretariat has taken various kinds of action, the first being an internal redistribution of resources with a view to strengthening its priority activities. Secondly, it has made an intensive effort to seek extra-budgetary resources, either from UNDP or from

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donor countries. Thirdly, it has resorted to adjustments in its internal organization in an effort to make the most effective use of the resources available (recommendations of the Administrative Management Service (AMS)). Fourthly, to carry out the tasks assigned to it, it has made extensive use of the other two bodies in the System (CELADE and ILPES), taking advantage of their vast experience in questions relating to population and development and economic and social planning, respectively.

20. In spite of all these efforts, the secretariat has the problem of insufficient resources to perform the necessary tasks involved in working with countries at their request in highly varied fields, which it understands to be its unescapable obligation.

21. The secretariat wishes to put this situation on record since in April 1981 we must submit a new draft programme of work for 1981-1983 to the session of the Commission, and it is very important for member countries to be advised of the lack of symmetry between the resources available and the new assignments which may have financial implications in view of the difficulties of obtaining resources from extra-budgetary sources.

22. The secretariat firmly believes that in view of its privileged position both within the United Nations System and among the other regional bodies it is in a position to make a significant contribution to overcoming the numerous problems facing its member countries, especially new countries and those which are geographically disadvantaged.