



The Reform of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): A Never-Ending Story?

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Many critics accuse the G8 of being unrepresentative and lacking in transparency. In its place, they call for the creation of a democratically legitimate decision-making body under the United Nations, in which countries of the Global South would be equally represented. They often overlook the fact that such a decision-making body already exists in the form of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. The Council, however, has so far been politically insignificant. All attempts at basic reform and upgrade have thus far been unsuccessful. With the decisions taken at the 2005 World Summit and the report of the UN "Coherence Panel" (see Thomas Fues's contribution in this edition), new and remarkable reform recommendations are now on the table. Is this another chapter in the never-ending story of ECOSOC reform, or could it be more?

The birth defect of ECOSOC

The structural weaknesses of the United Nations in the area of international economic and financial policy is based on a constructional flaw in the UN Charter. The founders of the United Nations defined "international social and economic cooperation" as one of the core tasks of the international organisation in 1945, and created ECOSOC as one of the six main bodies of the United Nations (next to the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the UN Secretariat). Nevertheless, ECOSOC – unlike the Security Council – was placed under the authority of the General Assembly (Art. 60 of the Charter). Since the beginning therefore, ECOSOC has only ever been a second class body. It is permitted to submit recommendations but it is not granted decision-making power.

A further problem with the Council is its size. With a total of 54 members, ECOSOC is too small to function as a representative forum for discussion of economic and social matters. Many countries of the G77 do not feel adequately

represented in it. In contrast, as a coordinating and decision-making body it is too large. Most industrialised countries dismiss it as cumbersome and ineffective. Consequently, the important development debates of the last decades did not take place in ECOSOC but at the UNCTAD conferences, and later at the annual meetings of the IMF and the World Bank as well as at the international conferences of the United Nations.

50 years of reform efforts

For the past 50 years there have been continued attempts to either reform ECOSOC or to create an entirely new global decision-making body for economic and social matters. Recommendations from expert commissions and government initiatives have in the meantime amassed enough to fill libraries. In its 1995 report, the Commission on Global Governance presented its proposal for a "Global Council". Similar ideas were brought forth in subsequent years, albeit under new names (World Economic Council, Council for Sustainable Development, Global Governance Group, Economic Security Council etc.) The collective goal of these initiatives was to create a global decision-making body that was more competent and more authoritative than ECOSOC, while at the same time more representative and open than the Security Council or the G8.

In 2002, the French president Jacques Chirac took up the idea and called for the creation of an Economic and Social Security Council. The German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul, has also repeatedly advocated the creation of a Global Council.

There are different ideas as to how such a Council should be created and where it should be located. There are three options on the table:

- Creation of a G20 or L20+ outside the UN: In order to address the criticism over the exclusivity of the G8, there are diverse proposals to expand, add or even replace the group. A prominent advocate for this concept is the former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin with his proposal for an L20 ("Leaders 20"). Similarly, in its final report for September 2006, the International Task Force for Global Public Goods comes out in favour of an "L25" (also see W&E-Background Jul-Aug 2006).
- Creation of an Economic Security Council: The recommendation for the creation of an Economic Security Council has appeared in many reform initiatives since the mid 1980s. It is envisioned as a new economic policy decision-making body under the umbrella of the UN and on par with the Security Council. It should either supersede ECOSOC or assume some of its functions. This would require an amendment in the UN Charter, which would have to be passed by resolution and ratified by a minimum of 128 states (including the Permanent Members of the Security Council) – an as yet hopeless endeavour.

- Upgrading ECOSOC: To many it seems nonsensical to create a new Global Economic Council when there already exists a body (the ECOSOC) that could take over global economic steering and coordinating functions – if it were appropriately upgraded. An amendment to the Charter would not be essential for this, although a change in the political will of members states would. In the run-up to the 2005 World Summit, there were pragmatic proposals to this, some of which can be found in the outcome document of the summit. However, so far governments have not implemented these recommendations.

Incremental reform steps...

In the outcome document of the 2005 World Summit, governments endorsed the idea of ECOSOC as the main UN organ dealing with economic and social matters. In order to strengthen its political significance, the Council is to meet once a year on a ministerial level. Its task should first and foremost consist of monitoring the implementation of the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs. Every two years it should serve as a high-ranking "Forum for Development Cooperation" in order to analyze trends in international development policies and to facilitate coherence between the development goals and policies in other sectors.

Upgrading ECOSOC to a kind of "International Development Council" could signify a step forward. At the same time however, its mandate would be narrowed down to development issues. Its competencies in the area of human rights have already been transferred to the newly created Human Rights Council. International economic, monetary and trade policy decisions would continue to be dealt with outside of the UN. The United Nations would leave these issues to the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO.

Whether there will nonetheless be a gradual strengthening of ECOSOC depends primarily on the willingness of governments to accept its bigger role in development policies. In the follow-up to the World Summit, they have so far been unable to reach an agreement.

...or the big hit after all?

In its recommendations for the reform of ECOSOC, the report of the "Coherence Panel" goes well beyond what could be expected, given its composition (mostly incumbent politicians and diplomats) and the arduous reform debates at the UN level. What is highly surprising is the suggestion to create, within the framework of ECOSOC, a Global Leader's Forum (L-27). The Forum would comprise the heads of state of half its members, rotating on the basis of equitable geographic representation. It would not have a decision-making function, but a broader thematic mandate.

The report formulates the role of the Forum as follows:

- *Provide leadership and guidance to the international community on development and global public goods issues.*
- *Develop a long-term strategic policy framework to secure consistency in the policy goals of the major international organizations.*
- *Promote consensus-building among governments and integrated solutions for global economic, social and environmental issues.*

Such a L-27 Forum would strengthen the UN in the area of international economic, social and environmental policy both symbolically and politically. It would be a more "democratic" counter-model to the exclusive club of the G8. Up until now, recommendations as such mostly came from NGOs and were dismissed as unrealistic and naïve by governments. It is therefore extraordinary that next to the Prime Ministers of Norway, Pakistan and Mozambique, fellow panel members Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Bush administration's Under Secretary for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Josette Sheeran, are supporting such an initiative. Whether this will increase the chances of the proposal being realised remains to be seen.

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