

## BRIEF IV. ECOSOC Subsidiary Bodies

Updated January 2024

*This brief is part of a series aimed to provide background information on ECOSOC strengthening. Briefs include (i) ECOSOC mandates and evolution of functions; (ii) policy dialogue and guidance; (iii) guiding and promoting a coherent and coordinated UN system; (iv) subsidiary bodies; (v) relationship with the General Assembly, Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council; (vi) countries in special situations; and (vii) addressing emergency issues.*

ECOSOC oversees a complex ecosystem of subsidiary bodies, including eight functional commissions (composed of government representatives), nine expert bodies (some composed of governmental experts and others composed of experts serving in their personal capacity); and five regional commissions. In addition, it oversees standing committees, such as the Committee on the NGOs and the Committee for Programme and Coordination; ad hoc bodies, such as the Ad Hoc Advisory Group on Haiti; and other related bodies, such as the International Narcotics Control Board and UN Nutrition.<sup>1</sup> The Council is entrusted to guide and coordinate the work of its subsidiary and related bodies. It thus has an influence on a wide remit of the work of the UN development system.

### « Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies »

Functional commissions are deliberative bodies whose role is to consider and make recommendations on issues in their respective areas of responsibility and expertise in the economic, social, health, environmental and related fields, including population and development, statistics, gender equality and the empowerment of women, narcotic drugs, crime prevention and criminal justice, science, technology and development, among others. In effect, they constitute the technical arm of the intergovernmental machinery, providing policy options, proposing indicators and benchmarks, and carrying out the detailed analysis of economic and social issues, making available substantive analysis and material to inform the proceedings of the parent body, ECOSOC. These bodies have their unique membership and own working methods. Some are policy oriented and provide policy options and carry out the detailed analysis of the economic and social issues needed to inform the substantive work of ECOSOC. Others are more technical in nature, tend to work with and for their own constituency and help establish global norms and standards on a number of issues, including statistics, drug control, crime prevention.



ECOSOC's range of technical work through its expert bodies extends deeper into areas that require international cooperation for their adequate functioning. For example, the Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters provides authoritative guidance to promote international cooperation on tax matters, while the Committee of Experts on Public Administration provides guidelines and recommendations on effective governance and other public administration matters. The Committee for Development Policy advises the Council on cross-cutting sustainable development issues and also defines the list of the Least Developed Countries. The Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods promotes sustainable transport that is safe, clean and competitive, by improving traffic safety, environmental performance, energy efficiency, inland transport security and efficient service provision. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues provides expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the UN system through ECOSOC.

The recommendations of the functional commissions and expert bodies, contained in their reports to the Council, are considered during the June and July Management Segment. When negotiated outcomes are adopted by a subsidiary body, the Council is generally endorses them without repeating the discussions related to what is being recommended. But it reviews and can negotiate draft resolutions recommended for its adoption.

<sup>1</sup> For information on the subsidiary bodies of the Council, please see <https://ecosoc.un.org/en/about-us/ecosoc-subsidiary-bodies>

## « ECOSOC's relation with its subsidiary bodies »

In an effort to enhance policy coherence, ECOSOC subsidiary bodies have evolved, and their functioning has been modified, including through redefining their terms of references, regrouping or discontinuing.<sup>2</sup> The General Assembly, in its resolution 50/227, called on the Economic and Social Council to fully implement its authority to take final decisions on the activities of its subsidiary bodies and on other matters in its system-wide coordination and overall guidance functions in the economic, social and related fields. Resolution 52/12B requested the review of “mandates, composition, functions and working methods of the Functional Commissions and Expert Groups and bodies with a view to ensuring more effective and coordinated discussions and outcomes of their work”. This was followed by resolution 57/270B which again requested the subsidiary bodies to review their working methods to better maximize their impact on the implementation of major UN conferences.

The Council has also undertaken numerous initiatives to improve interaction with its subsidiary bodies, in particular its Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies. ECOSOC resolution 1998/46, mandated the Council to hold joint bureau meetings with each of the functional commissions. To promote a more efficient approach, resolution 2006/44 led to the replacement of the meetings with each bureau of Functional Commissions and expert bodies with one meeting with the Chairpersons to be held at the beginning of each calendar year during which issues of agenda-setting, horizontal and vertical coordination were discussed. In 2020, for the first time, the ECOSOC Bureau decided to open its [meeting with the Chairs](#) to the membership of the United Nations and civil society.

Following the 2005 Summit, in its resolution 61/16, the General Assembly mandated ECOSOC to oversee system-wide coordination and the balanced integration of economic, social and environmental policies and programmes aimed at promoting sustainable development, providing direction towards the substantive unification and coordinated follow-up of the UN development agenda. The subsidiary bodies were also requested to strengthen their contributions to ECOSOC's agenda, including the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF). With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, the subsidiary bodies were requested (para. 85), within the context of their respective mandates, to conduct thematic reviews of progress in achieving sustainable development, in support of the review and follow-up responsibility of the high-level political forum (HLPF). Their contribution represents an important part of ECOSOC's contribution to the HLPF. The annual joint bureau meeting has become a relevant space for the Council to provide guidance to the subsidiary bodies on integrated approaches in follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda thus contributing to the coherence and coordination demanded of ECOSOC by Member States.

[Subsequent resolutions on the strengthening of ECOSOC](#) have emphasized and strengthened its mandated to provide oversight and coordination of its subsidiary bodies. In resolution 68/1, the GA called on ECOSOC to promote the harmonization and coordination of the agendas and work programmes of the functional commissions by promoting a clearer division of labour among them and providing clear policy guidance to them. It also tasked the Council to conduct action-oriented reviews of the activities, reports and recommendations of the subsidiary bodies. Furthermore, it called on the subsidiary bodies to review the resolution in relation to their respective work programmes with a view to exploring necessary adjustments and changes to their methods of work, reporting and timing of their sessions. This was intended to facilitate consideration of substantive changes to their work programmes, and to find meaningful ways to contribute to ECOSOC and the HLPF. Following the adoption of the resolution, some functional commissions adopted a multi-year programme of work to align with the main theme of ECOSOC and to support the thematic reviews of the HLPF. The subsidiary bodies have included in their report an executive summary with conclusions and recommendations and issues that require attention by the Council. In addition, the President of ECOSOC has invited the functional commissions and expert bodies to submit contributions which are included in a synthesis of voluntary submissions.<sup>3</sup> There is further scope to engage with the issues raised by subsidiary bodies.

In resolution 72/305, the GA noted that ECOSOC should (1) ensure an adequate division of labour among its subsidiary bodies and harmonization and coordination of their agendas and work programmes, while ensuring that the principles, critical aspects and implementation gaps of the 2030 Agenda are addressed (para. 2); and (2) improve its outcomes and the outcomes of its subsidiary bodies, making them more relevant, coherent and solution-oriented to address implementation challenges and ensuring their follow-up so as to strengthen the impact of the work of

<sup>2</sup> A/RES/50/227; A/RES/51/240; A/RES/52/12B; ECOSOC Resolutions 1997/61, 1998/46, 1999/51 and 2001/27.

<sup>3</sup> For the 2023 session see E/HLPF/2023/4.

the Council (para. 3). ECOSOC subsidiary bodies were also to adopt their own respective themes, aligned with the main theme of the Council (para. 5).

More recently, resolution 75/290A invited the Council to continue to strengthen its oversight, guidance and coordination role of its subsidiary bodies and invited the President and Bureau to work with the Bureaux of its subsidiary bodies, and in consultation with delegations during the 2022 session of the Council, so as to identify possible actions to be taken to implement the provisions of paragraphs 28 and 29 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 72/305.<sup>4</sup>

A review was undertaken on the basis of the [assessments](#) and recommendations of the Bureaux of ECOSOC functional commissions and expert bodies and informal consultations among Member States. Following this, a decision ([2022/334](#)) was adopted in June 2022, which invited the President and Bureau of the Council as well as the Chairs and Bureaux of its functional commissions and expert bodies, all Member States and the Secretariat to implement, to the extent possible within existing mandates and resources, the recommendations contained in the [Vice-President's summary](#).

Functional commissions and expert bodies have informed in their reports their progress in the implementation of these recommendations. The requests for meetings between the ECOSOC Bureau and the Bureaux of subsidiary bodies during their sessions as increased, as has the participation of representatives in each other's meetings. In resolution 75/290 A, the GA decided that the Coordination Segment would replace the integration segment and the informal meeting of the Council with the Chairs of the subsidiary bodies. The revamped [coordination segment](#) is mandated to coordinate, including through forward-looking policy guidance to ensure coherence and direction, the policies and normative work of subsidiary bodies, principal organs and specialized agencies in the economic, social, environmental and related fields relating to the 2030 Agenda and other internationally agreed development goals, steering "the Council system towards an efficient and integrated workflow throughout the Council cycle leading up to the high-level political forum on sustainable development."

According to the 2030 Agenda, the thematic reviews of progress on the SDGs taking place at the HLPF could be supported by reviews by the ECOSOC functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies and forums, a request emphasized in resolution 75/290 B.

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<sup>4</sup> 28. The Economic and Social Council should strengthen its oversight and coordination role of its subsidiary bodies. It should review their work with a view to ensuring their continued relevance. It will also ensure that they produce technical and expert analysis, assessments and policy recommendations to inform the integrated view of the Council and inform efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. It should effectively integrate the outcomes of its subsidiary bodies into its own work. 29. The Economic and Social Council should request its subsidiary bodies to ensure that they best support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the work of the Council. Their work should reflect the need for an integrated and action-oriented approach to the Sustainable Development Goals. Their recommendations should build on a solid evidence-based review of progress on the 2030 Agenda and of the outcomes of conferences and summits in their respective area. They should work in an efficient, effective, transparent and inclusive manner.