

Martin Hill

THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

coordinating its economic and social work

The United Nations System:

coordinating its economic and social work

A study prepared under the auspices of the
United Nations Institute for Training and Research
(UNITAR)

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Foreword

The author occupied a special place among international officials. In the first place, he was, so to speak, the doyen of the corps, having served without interruption since 1927 in the Secretariats of the League of Nations and the United Nations, and recently with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). In the second place, during almost his entire career he was concerned with building up the economic and social side of international work. He was, for example, Secretary of the Bruce Committee set up by the League in 1939, which prepared the ground for the United Nations Economic and Social Council; he was Dr Gunnar Myrdal's deputy during the earliest days of the Economic Commission for Europe; he was one of the top members of the staff of the San Francisco Conference and the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations that met in London in 1945; he was deputy-head of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs for 12 years, and, for more than 20, the personal representative of my predecessors Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant to the Specialized Agencies; he was Rapporteur of the Administrative Committee on Coordination and Chairman of its Preparatory Committee; he held the newly created post of Assistant Secretary-General for Inter-Agency Affairs from 1967 until his retirement.

Mr Martin Hill wrote with the personal knowledge and authority which such experience affords. He had dealt with a broad spectrum of structural and organizational questions that have for some time been preoccupying the UN's intergovernmental organs as being of vital importance if the UN is to carry out effectively and comprehensively its enormous and rapidly expanding responsibilities. In the last few years, moreover, the General Assembly has been especially concerned to bring about such restructuring of the United Nations System as may be needed to make it fully responsive to the requirements of the new international order and the Charter of the Economic Rights and Duties of States. On some of the issues involved the views

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of Governments seem to have been moving closer together; on others the differences are still considerable.

The book owes its origin to an initiative of UNITAR, financially assisted by the Rockefeller Foundation that led to Mr Hill preparing, in the Spring of 1974, a study for UNITAR under the title 'Towards Greater Order, Coherence and Coordination in the United Nations System', which was made available to the Economic and Social Council that summer and since then to other organs concerned. That study has now been revised and enlarged and brought up to date. The views expressed in the paper that follows are the author's own; they do not necessarily correspond – and may even be at variance on specific points – with those of the responsible UN inter-governmental organs and myself. It represents, however, the most comprehensive treatment ever attempted of the burning issues with which it deals, and I cannot but think that it will long be found indispensable to students as well as to government officials concerned with international organization.



Preface

In his 'Introduction to the *Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization*', Dr Kurt Waldheim stated in August 1976 that '... in these last years I have learnt to appreciate the extraordinary range, variety and sometimes the unexpectedness, of the Organization's activities, the great possibilities as well as the obstacles which it confronts, and the wealth of human talent and dedication which is to be found among the national representatives and international civil servants who work in the United Nations System'. Martin Hill was one of these dedicated international civil servants, with an experience in addition which was unrivalled in international administration. He has brought to this study his unparalleled knowledge of the United Nations System, meticulous scholarship and much painstaking attention to the details of the relationship between various organizations.

The present work is an expanded version of an earlier study which was published by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in 1974, under the title, 'Towards Greater Order, Coherence and Coordination in the United Nations System'. That study exerted a significant influence on discussions and decisions on development and coordination within the United Nations System. The importance and value of this study was recognized by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and was thus issued as one of its documents; the Council used it extensively in the rationalization of its structures and procedures and in preparation for what was to become the historic sixth Special Session of the General Assembly. This eventually culminated in the adoption of the momentous Declaration on the Establishment of a New Economic Order and a Programme of Action for Implementing the Declaration. I have no doubt that the present study by Martin Hill will assist not only the international community towards a greater understanding of the issues confronting the world, but also the United Nations System of organizations, through its better coordination of efforts, towards increasing its effectiveness as an agent for change and development.

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The study begins with a lucid and brief introduction, which explains the concept and complex nature of the 'United Nations System', its purposes and objectives, and how it operates. While political and security questions engage a substantial part of the time and resources of the United Nations itself, the main preoccupation of the system of the UN Organizations and bodies is the promotion of economic and social development through global policies and operational programmes, which have increasing multi-sectoral implications. The introduction makes clear the role of substantive and administrative coordination and the machinery and mechanisms at the intergovernmental and secretariat levels.

Part I of the study deals with the problems of coordination and its setting. Chapter 1 sketches the difficulties inherent in the decentralized UN System, tracing its growth from the League of Nations through the tortuous path the United Nations took in its early years. Particular emphasis is given to the controversy over the extent and methods of decentralization. There is a broad view of the growth of the UN System on the basis of Charter provisions and the specific agreements concluded between the UN and its agencies. The problem of creating a common and integrated system, with a central role from the very beginning for the Economic and Social Council, assumes significance as new programmes and responsibilities are evolved. Questions of competing jurisdiction, conflicting patterns of intergovernmental participation and the absence of coordination at the national level soon came to bedevil the system.

The inter-agency relationships and coordination developed under the constraints of the above factors are fully illustrated in Chapter 2. The increase in operational activities, involving innumerable organs, called for coordination at all levels as the system was not built to resolve contentious issues thrown up at every stage. Piecemeal and expedient measures only helped to postpone a more radical and comprehensive restructuring and redefinition of roles and functions. We are still faced with this task and Chapter 2 provides a clear survey of issues involved in terms of programmes, organizations, procedures and above all basic principles.

Coordination is a much abused word in the national and international context. To understand the concept, one has to appreciate the full import of the matters susceptible to coordination. In the UN System these are more precise within its own policy objectives and built-in mechanisms. Chapter 3 gives us a very cogent account of the content of coordination activities. The straightforward aspect is administrative and budgetary coordination, based mainly on the

formal powers of the Economic and Social Council and the concept of the 'Common System' accepted by agencies in terms of the agreements entered into between them and the United Nations. The main mechanism of administrative coordination is seen to be the Committee of Executive Heads (Administrative Committee on Coordination – ACC) established by the Economic and Social Council and its many subcommittees and task forces; these are all functional groups for implementing decisions and establishing inter-agency coordination at the inter-secretariat level. There is a broad legislative overview of specific matters, e.g. finance, by such intergovernmental bodies as the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, functioning primarily within the legislative framework of the United Nations itself and serviced by the UN Secretariat, as contrasted with the ACC and its subgroups. But programme coordination, with its three-tier arrangement of central control, regional distribution and country-level implementation, is a different and more difficult operation, which continues to baffle all effective attempts at understanding by intergovernmental bodies, special UN Commissions and scholarly thinking. We are fortunate to have a succinct statement of this fundamental subject in this chapter.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 give a detailed account of the powers, responsibilities and methods of operation of the intergovernmental and inter-secretariat organs engaged in coordination. This is followed by a brief statement, in Chapter 7, of the major constraints, and is illustrated with typical examples of the confused situation. Thus we find in Part I, a panoramic view of the purposes of coordination as envisaged in the Charter, the many paths it has taken over the years, the issues faced in carrying out the task, and the approaches and instrumentalities used in actual practice.

Part II is, in a sense, more important and useful for solving the problems of coordination, although on first reading, it might appear very technical. However, the descriptive account of Part I, together with the first chapter (Chapter 8) of Part II which provides the context and the perspective, adequately prepare the general reader for a full understanding and appreciation of the sound prescriptive measures proposed in Chapters 9 to 13.

The context and the perspective are updated in the light of the comprehensive and concrete call for action embodied in the decisions and recommendations of the Sixth and Seventh Special Sessions which dealt with the theme of the New International Economic Order. This new orientation requires considerable restructuring of

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the UN System, a revitalized machinery for operational activities, and unavoidable coordination on a multi-sectoral basis.

The primary task in this context is the role and the functioning of the Economic and Social Council. Chapter 9 indicates how this can be achieved through strong leadership from the General Assembly and through rationalization of the procedures and methods of work by the Council itself. The wise suggestions for employing tact, persuasion and initiative over a widening circle of intergovernmental bodies and proliferating secretariats are timely and practical.

The elaboration of attitudes, practices and policies of inter-governmental organs and Governments, in Chapter 10, reflects Martin Hill's complete comprehension of the essential ingredients of the prevailing situation. This highly controversial and complicated situation is handled in this chapter with restraint, combined with bold imagination, and will be found extremely useful by national and international officials. The general reader is able to follow the intricacies of decision making and the challenging possibilities now available to the Secretary-General and other executive heads of agencies.

In logical sequence to the above, Chapter 11 provides the general guidelines governing the work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, which is vested with the major responsibility for coordinating the work, both administrative and substantive, of the UN System.

While policies are set, centres of coordination established, and the correct procedures and mechanisms adopted, in the final analysis as Chapter 12 makes clear, the administrative and organizational arrangements, 'subject to the imponderable factor of the personalities, capacities and nationalities of the officials concerned' are the most crucial. This chapter advances a reasoned thesis for the central leadership of the Secretary-General in all matters of coordination. By analyzing the evolution of relationship between the United Nations Development Programme, with its new structures and procedures, and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with its pivotal role for policy coordination within the UN Secretariat on operational activities, we are able to see the need for changes at various levels based on the sound theory that 'the separation of policy and operations is of questionable validity'. The tasks performed by the Office of Inter-Agency Affairs and Coordination, functioning both as the secretariat for the inter-agency ACC and also the arm of the Secretary-General for these matters, are briefly indicated within the general context.

The last chapter (Chapter 13) of Part II of the study offers an

insight into the responsibilities of the General Assembly and the need for a fresh and frank reappraisal of its functions if there is to be the desired concentration of authority and administration. We are shown the signposts of danger if the UN System does not move in this direction. Obviously the General Assembly will exercise its functions through the Economic and Social Council, a principle which requires no change but merely reaffirmation by 'streamlining policy making and management through a greater concentration of authority in the Council'.

We are made fully aware of the immediate task of bringing about an increased measure of coherence and rationality to the United Nations System as a whole, taking into account such factors as the innumerable underlying issues of resource distribution, the allocation of priorities for programmes among different agencies and sectors, and the relationship of the system to non-UN organizations. While not attempting to provide answers to such larger questions, the study has, in my opinion, succeeded in unravelling the intricate and complex relationships that now exist at the intergovernmental and inter-secretariat levels of policy making in operational activities within the UN System, and the crucial function of coordination. This is no small achievement and I have no doubt that with the greater understanding made possible by this study, those in the UN System can undertake more effectively the gigantic task of reorganization before them. The perception of possibilities in carrying out this task is a tribute to the late Martin Hill's long years of hard work at the United Nations in the area of coordination.

The special outlook of a scholar-administrator which was so evident in Martin Hill, reached fulfillment in the last decade of his life when he became one of the moving spirits behind the founding and organization of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and for a different purpose a few years later, the United Nations University. I was privileged to have been associated with him during this period and admired him.

He became a Special Fellow of UNITAR under a Rockefeller Foundation Grant during the period when most of this book was written.

He was latterly the New York representative of the World Intellectual Property Organization until his death.

UNITAR is fortunate to have been a partner in the preparation of this study and I commend it to a still larger audience.

Davidson Nicol
Executive Director, UNITAR
Under-Secretary-General,
United Nations

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Introduction

The significance of coordination in the United Nations System

The term 'United Nations System' is used in this paper to denote all parts of the United Nations Organization itself which are concerned with promoting the economic and social goals set out in the United Nations Charter, as well as the specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which are working with the United Nations towards the same ends. Coordination in the system is important in so far as it is a means towards those ends, but it should not be considered as an end in itself. As the then Director-General of the International Labour Office remarked a few years ago: 'In the final reckoning, the test of all our efforts is what we do for human freedom and human dignity, what we do to banish fear and want, what we do to promote greater economic security and greater equality of opportunity... We will not be judged by the perfection or imperfection of the institutional pattern but by the quality of human life which our work makes possible.'¹

It may be argued that the contribution already made through the United Nations to economic development and social progress throughout the world has not been seriously affected by a touch, at least, of organizational incoherence. Indeed, some lack of coordination, including some duplication and overlapping of activities, disputes about competences, untidiness and discrepancies in administrative arrangements, occasional failures to cooperate, conceptual differences in regard to objectives – all of which are common phenomena in national administrations – is unavoidable in a dynamic, growing and pioneering international system. Furthermore, it is part of the price that will always have to be paid by the United Nations for the advantage of being able, through the international functional agencies, to mobilize the active participation and support of the relevant technical ministries and professional groups in each country. It would be easy, though tedious, to show how all parts of the decentralized system have learned to work together, on an ever-widening series of broad programmes in a way never envisaged in

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1945, and, still more striking, how in major emergencies such as the Congo operation of 1960–1964,² the Biafra situation in 1969, the aftermath of the Bangladesh conflict of 1971–1972, and the Sudano-Saharan drought from 1973, as well as in numerous operations for relief and reconstruction after sudden natural disasters, the specialized agencies and organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, have worked in concert under United Nations leadership.

While all this is true, there has been growing criticism, from different angles, of defects in the system, as well as doubt regarding the capacity of the system to cope successfully with the immense range and scope of new tasks requiring international action that each year brings forth. Part of this criticism and doubt has been concerned with issues connected with coordination which have been familiar for the past 25 years or more, such as the unresolved differences of view regarding the respective competences of different agencies in particular fields, and of the United Nations regional economic commissions and the specialized agencies in regard to action at the regional level; and there continue to be cases of duplication and overlapping, of lack of cooperation among organizations and their staffs, of failures to consult, and divergencies of objectives. But to a considerable extent the thrust of the criticism has been shifting. There has been wider recognition of the value of the practical, if often minor, results, reported on year by year, of the regular efforts to solve individual coordination problems, as they arise, through the machinery which has been built up under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). A broader set of problems moved to the centre of the picture, problems concerned with policy coordination as well as structure – and not incompatible with good coordination among officials, in the sense that they work smoothly together without duplication.

The very complexity of the system as well as the extraordinary diversity of, and often apparent lack of coherence in, its activities, are themselves sources of frustration, as is the sense, especially among the major contributors, that the regular budgets, and the programmes financed under those budgets by mandatory assessments, escape their control. Furthermore, frustration has been voiced, with different emphases by different groups of countries, because of the lack of cohesion within the United Nations itself and the various parts of its Secretariat; the proliferation of intergovernmental organs, many with overlapping mandates and almost all of unmanageable size; the pro-

liferation of highly independent voluntary funds for purposes not necessarily corresponding to established priorities; the soaring budgets for tasks which may not always be well considered from the standpoint of cost/benefit or coordination; the quasi-impossibility of comparing and therefore of coordinating the future plans of different agencies; the involvement of so many agencies, including organs of the United Nations itself, in almost every undertaking; the independent public information and, in many cases, fund-raising activities of several agencies and most of the United Nations programmes; the 'jungle' of United Nations and agency regional and subregional structures which makes system-wide action at those levels so difficult; the over-frequent and uncoordinated visits by officials of different organizations to the capitals of developing countries, and last but not least, the unconscionable time and effort which the multifarious coordinating processes seem to require. Underlying such complaints – the list of which could easily be extended – but partly independent of them, is concern about the increasingly and seriously fragmented character of the system and the possibility of further fragmentation in very important fields such as raw materials and energy, and the resources of the sea-bed and ocean floor, if current trends are not arrested.

Such preoccupations and criticisms may not be altogether justified but they do have some substance and they combine to constitute a challenge to the reputation of the system that cannot be ignored. In some respects, the situation, especially within the UN itself, has been getting steadily worse. Future use of the UN machinery and support for its economic and social work may largely depend on the degree to which these shortcomings can be corrected. That was the justification for the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) paper, on which the present study is based; that paper was written in the belief that economic and social cooperation through the United Nations System has become essential and irreplaceable, that no effort must be spared to preserve and further it, and that considerable improvement can be brought about without insuperable difficulty.

The problems within the United Nations System represent, of course, only part of the problem of bringing greater order, coherence and coordination into international economic and social action as a whole, among United Nations and non-United Nations organizations, world-wide and regional, and between United Nations bodies and the bilateral aid activities of individual donor Governments. To separate the part from the whole has considerable disadvantages since the duplication and even conflict between United Nations and

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non-United Nations bodies are themselves among the most serious and conspicuous causes of criticism, and solutions may well affect the structure, functioning and programmes of organs within, no less than those outside, the United Nations System.³ Nevertheless, enough has been said to indicate that, even with this restriction, the range of questions involved is enormous. It will be necessary indeed not only to confine discussion to broad issues, avoiding any attempt to consider detailed problems and methods of coordination, but also to exclude any but general references to the 'operational' problems and in particular those relating to technical cooperation – to which such close attention was given in the *Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System*⁴ (hereafter referred to as 'the Capacity Study') and in the deliberations on it of the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the General Assembly.

Whatever the shortcomings of the United Nations' own structure, about which there will be a good deal to say later, the relationships between the United Nations and the specialized agencies have so far been the main object of official scrutiny. Government opinion in this regard seems to have shifted not a little from that which prevailed in 1945 at the San Francisco Conference (in which much less than half of the present membership of the United Nations and the agencies participated) and during the years immediately following, when most of the agreements between the United Nations and the agencies were concluded. Having shown at the beginning a perhaps excessive concern to protect the autonomy and independence of the specialized agencies and avoid any danger that the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council might seek to control their policies and programmes, many Governments are now putting increased emphasis on the need for greater unity and leadership in the system.

Dag Hammarskjöld, as Secretary-General, sought the same thing more than 20 years ago. Using the theme 'Unity within Freedom', he envisaged the heads of agencies working with him to make ACC of greater service to the Council and the Governments through recommendations for action and priorities. He looked forward to the establishment of interorganizational relationships 'based on a spirit of mutual confidence directed towards common aims' which would 'in practice provide the Council with all the advantages of a closely unified system without any of the disadvantages of rigid centralization.'⁵ This idea did not receive from the Council or agencies the support he had hoped for and he soon lost interest in pursuing it, believing that the absence of an 'organ which through majority