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**MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF STATES MEMBERS OF ECLAC
TO THE UNITED NATIONS TO HEAR THE REPORT OF THE
MEETING OF THE AD HOC WORKING GROUP**

(New York, 25 October 1996)

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1. Mandate

1. The meeting was called by Mr. Fernando Berrocal Soto, Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United Nations, on behalf of the country holding the chairmanship of the twenty-sixth session of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and in accordance with agreements reached during the meeting of the ad hoc working group established pursuant to Commission resolution 553(XXVI). The purpose was to approve the final version of the report of the meeting held in Santiago, Chile, from 29 to 31 July 1996.

2. Place and date of the meeting

2. The meeting took place at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 25 October 1996.

3. Attendance

3. The meeting was attended by representatives of the following States members of the Commission: Argentina, Bahamas, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay and Venezuela.

4. Summary of the proceedings

4. The meeting opened with presentations by Ambassador Berrocal Soto, Mr. Melvin Sáenz Biolly, First Alternate Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations and Chairman of the ad hoc working group, and Mr. Gert Rosenthal, Executive Secretary of ECLAC.

5. Mr. Sáenz Biolly briefly described how the Commission at its twenty-sixth session had adopted resolution 553(XXVI) establishing an ad hoc working group open to all ECLAC member countries and empowered, in consultation with the Executive Secretary, 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 and the budgetary constraints faced by the United Nations.

6. He reported that the ad hoc working group, with the attendance of 32 member States and two associate members, had met at ECLAC headquarters in Santiago, Chile, from 29 to 31 July 1996. The working group had commenced the process of assigning priorities to the ECLAC work programme for the biennium 1998-1999 in the broader context of reform of the United Nations and the impact of reform on the Commission. The working group had asked him, as Chairman, to present a report of the meeting,

in conjunction with the Executive Secretary of ECLAC, to the delegations of ECLAC member States at United Nations Headquarters, in order to facilitate coordination between the exercise of formulating the work programme and the budget process and to provide the delegations with further information prior to the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council.

7. Ambassador Fernando Berrocal then addressed the meeting. After stressing the importance of ECLAC to the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and recalling its significant contributions to economic thought in the region, he said that he was pleased to be able to convene this brief meeting to hear a report on what the ad hoc working group had accomplished. The exercise was a new experiment in cooperation between the Commission members and the secretariat in defining ECLAC priorities and strategies and had demonstrated the secretariat's great willingness to work with the member States. The conclusions of the working group were reported in document LC/G.1942 of 13 September 1996, which had been distributed to all Governments of ECLAC member States and to their respective missions in New York.

8. The Executive Secretary of ECLAC then presented the report of the ad hoc working group to the participants. He noted that ECLAC had undertaken the exercise in compliance with the Commission's mandate and stressed the novel nature of the forum, which provided the secretariat and the Governments of member States an opportunity for consultation on how to adapt the work programme to changing circumstances. The content and scope of work programmes and priority-setting were issues fundamental to the reform of the United Nations, so that ongoing coordination between the Commission secretariat and members was a matter of necessity.

9. He said that the report of the first meeting of the ad hoc working group spoke for itself and that the usefulness of the new forum had been fully demonstrated. The exercise had not only resulted in joint decisions concerning priorities for the Commission's programme of work for the biennium 1998-1999, but would now make it easier to mesh the programming and budgeting processes. Apart from the specific decisions it had produced, the dialogue initiated in Santiago had inaugurated a highly constructive working style aimed at enhancing the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of ECLAC.

10. He stressed that the Commission's work programme must pass the "relevance test". In other words, it should reflect not just what the secretariat thought was important, or what the Governments thought was important, but rather the collective thinking of the member States and the secretariat. The resources required for implementation of the work programme should be justified on the basis of proper criteria. The Governments understood very well that not every priority identified in the programme of work was a priority for every member State. The objective, therefore, was to achieve the greatest possible consensus. In the past, the programmes of work had been adopted after only three or four hours of debate, a process that had not allowed for in-depth dialogue between member States and the secretariat, despite previous consultation by the secretariat with each country individually. At the first meeting of the ad hoc working group, the representatives of the Governments and the secretariat had had an opportunity to discuss proposed ECLAC activities and outputs in detail for three days until a consensus was reached on what was felt to be of vital importance. Although the debate was still ongoing, the exercise had complied with the mandate of the General Assembly to do more with less, more efficiently, choosing very carefully what needed to be done.

11. His chief conclusions were that: i) the report of the ad hoc working group should not be seen as a finished product, but as a decisive step towards a larger goal; ii) the group's manner of work had been extremely productive, not just for the secretariat, but for and among the member States themselves. When

they were not in agreement, the secretariat had tried to find a consensus position; the whole meeting had been the antithesis of a mere ritual exercise and had constituted a major advance towards establishing a collective forum for priority-setting; iii) there was room for improvement in the United Nations programming process and a need for better encoding to make programmes more quantifiable and measurable.

12. He then explained the four priority categories into which activities had been classified and discussed how the results were reflected in the revised programme of work. He said that activities considered essential, 10% of the total, had been classified under category "A", while those that would not be implemented unless resources frozen during 1996-1997 were released during the biennium 1998-1999 were placed in category "D" (5%); categories "B" and "C" related to activities of medium priority (representing 75% and 10% of the total, respectively).

13. In conclusion, he said that the secretariat did not consider the report an end product, but part on an ongoing process in which the Commission was creating a new work discipline. The purpose of the present meeting was not to debate the document, but to take note of its contents and of the procedure followed to assign priorities. ECLAC would continue to prepare the budget for the biennium 1998-1999, and the next meeting of the ad hoc working group would probably be held at United Nations Headquarters to ensure wide participation by the Caribbean countries, whose representatives found it difficult to travel to Santiago.

14. A number of delegations then made statements, some expressing the opinion that the meeting of the ad hoc working group in Santiago had been extremely useful and had offered a good opportunity to initiate a dialogue on substantive issues.

15. One delegation stressed that the regional dimension of development was an important issue and that the priority accorded in the work programme to support for open regionalism was very timely; now that integration processes, including MERCOSUR, NAFTA and the Free Trade Area of the Americas, were underway in the region, the role of ECLAC as an independent organization had become indispensable.

16. Representatives of other countries said that change in the United Nations was linked to the new pattern of international relations, and reflected, among many other considerations, the necessity for greater fiscal austerity. Although reform could not be equated simply with budget-cutting, there was indeed a need to promote efficiency and effectiveness in the use of available resources.

17. A representative pointed out that although the importance of the regional commissions had been reaffirmed by recent General Assembly resolution 50/227, all present were aware that some countries were questioning the usefulness of the commissions and that the topic frequently came up in debates on reform of the United Nations.

18. Another delegation stressed that in matters relating to the status of women the regional commissions had an important intellectual contribution to make in following up the Platform for Action adopted at the Beijing conference and asked whether those activities had been properly provided for in the programme of work.

19. One representative asked whether the secretariat was implicitly accepting the need to reduce activities in the new climate of budget constraint and noted that his Government, at least, did not agree that it was possible to reduce the budgetary contributions to the regional commissions. He expressed

concerns about the impact of reform on ECLAC in comparison with its effects on the other regional commissions.

20. In response to the two previous questions, the Executive Secretary said that ECLAC was planning to participate in activities in follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action; among other things, it had scheduled a regional meeting on the subject for the latter part of 1997. With regard to the second question, he agreed that "reform" should not be equated with "downsizing" the secretariat. Even so, he said, one should remember that in fact in 1996 ECLAC had been operating with considerably smaller funding than originally proposed in the budget submitted to Headquarters in 1995. As he saw it, the point of the exercise was to enhance the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of ECLAC activities in order to make the best use possible, in terms of the generation of useful outputs, of whatever amount of resources was placed at the Commission's disposal.

21. With regard to the impact of the reform process on other regional commissions, he would not venture to make comparisons, since he was not sufficiently informed of all that was going on elsewhere. He was aware, however, that the Economic Commission for Africa was undergoing organizational reform and that the Economic Commission for Europe was in the midst of a priority-setting exercise similar in some respects to that undertaken at ECLAC. In general, he understood that all the regional commissions had embarked on a process of streamlining their activities, and if ECLAC had made more progress, it was probably because it had begun the process years earlier, long before the recent financial crisis had become evident.

22. In response to a question concerning the current status of the medium-term plan, he said that he understood that the secretariat's proposed plan had been accepted by the relevant bodies at Headquarters. The ad hoc working group would meet whenever circumstances warranted and as often as necessary to ensure that the process was significant; the next meeting would probably be held during the last quarter of 1997.

23. In answer to concerns about the United Nations reform process, he said that ECLAC had the advantages of strong institutional identity, good relations with member Governments and a clearly defined sphere of work based on its comparative advantages within and outside the United Nations system. Those institutional strengths should help ECLAC to adapt to changing circumstances.

24. In response to a final question, he said that he was not in agreement with the opinion expressed in Our Global Neighborhood, questioning the importance of the regional commissions. In his opinion, the United Nations needed regional forums that could help to make regionalism compatible with multilateralism. Otherwise, regionalism might cause the world to fragment into enclosed blocs. Moreover, the regional commissions were ideally situated to convey regional points of view to global forums and global perspectives to regional forums. For all these reasons, quite apart from the fact that it was more efficient for the United Nations to operate from the regions than from a central Headquarters, he was convinced that the commissions were undeniably useful. Whether or not their potential was being fully realized was a different question.

25. In conclusion, the Executive Secretary thanked all the representatives, noted the broad participation at the meeting and expressed his appreciation to the Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United Nations for the contribution the representative of his country had made as Chairman of the ad hoc working group. Ambassador Fernando Berrocal similarly thanked all the participants.