



Agenda item 86: Improvement of the methods of work of the General Assembly*

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* For the discussion of this item, see *Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventeenth Session, Plenary Meetings*, 1162nd and 1198th meetings.

DOCUMENT A/5123

Letter dated 26 April 1962 from the President of the General Assembly to the Secretary-General, transmitting a memorandum on the work of the Assembly

[Original text: French]
[3 May 1962]

I have the honour to transmit herewith a memorandum containing certain suggestions concerning changes which might be made in the work of the General Assembly in the interests of greater speed and efficiency.

I should be grateful if you would arrange for this memorandum to be circulated as a United Nations document to the delegations of all Member States.

(Signed) Mongi SLIM
President of the General Assembly

**MEMORANDUM ON THE WORK OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

1. My term of office as President of the sixteenth session of the General Assembly has obliged me to grapple with the difficulties of organizing the Assembly's work and has made me conscious of the urgent need to consider certain changes in the Assembly's procedure in order to ensure that its work produces rapid and fruitful results.

2. The increase in the number of Member States and in the number of problems brought before the General Assembly every year makes it more and more evident that it is impossible for the General Assembly to complete its work within the period allocated for the purpose. Recent sessions have revealed, clearly enough, the difficulty encountered every year in discussing all the items on the agenda of a regular session in the fourteen weeks between the opening of the General Assembly, on the third Tuesday in September, and the last ten days of December. Resumed sessions have become necessary.

Such resummptions cause major difficulties, not only for delegations, but also for the Secretariat, with all the responsibilities which it has to discharge both during the Assembly's sessions and also, between sessions, in dealing with the results of previous sessions and preparing for future work.

3. As a result of the observations I have made, particularly during the current session, and of the exchanges of views I have had with a number of delegations, it seemed to me that it would be useful if I submitted certain suggestions to the Members of the General Assembly for their consideration. The effect of these suggestions would be to adapt the procedure and practice of the General Assembly to the requirements of the new situation, without entailing any major changes in the rules of procedure and without restricting the opportunities for fruitful discussion likely to produce the thoroughly considered and agreed solutions which are required.

4. It is these suggestions which I venture to submit in this memorandum for delegations of Member States to consider and to follow up as they see fit.

**I. Opening date of the regular session of the
General Assembly**

5. Originally it was proposed that the regular session of the General Assembly should begin on the second Tuesday in September. Subsequently, on the recommendation of the Sub-Committee on Rules of Procedure, the Assembly adopted the rule at present in force, which

states that the regular session should begin on the third Tuesday in September.

6. In view of the fact that the agenda is becoming heavier and heavier and that the number of Member States is increasing, it would now seem to be desirable to amend the rules of procedure so that the regular session would begin on the first Tuesday in September. I believe that the two weeks gained in this way would be sufficient, in most cases, to enable the General Assembly to complete its work before the holidays at the end of the year. This method, by which the Assembly would have a longer session during the latter half of the year, seems to have certain advantages over another suggestion that the General Assembly should start its work in January and complete it by the beginning of May. Many parliaments meet during these months and Ministers for Foreign Affairs and members of parliament, who are generally appointed to delegations, would have some difficulty in attending the sessions.

7. It is essential, however, that the merits of the two proposals should be considered by the General Assembly, particularly since both would require an amendment to rule 1 of the rules of procedure.

II. Procedure

8. It seems to me that certain improvements in procedure could be made, without any major difficulty, in order to speed up the discussion of questions submitted to the General Assembly.

(a) *Submission of draft resolutions before discussion of an item*

9. During recent sessions it has become the practice to start discussing an item without any draft resolutions having been submitted by the proposer. The discussion thus begins with a general debate, at the end of which one or more draft resolutions are submitted. When the draft resolutions are considered, there is a new discussion which again involves the principles and views held by Member States and as a result takes on the nature of a second general debate.

10. At the early sessions of the General Assembly, there was a single debate on each item, which included a general discussion and statements by delegations of their views on the relevant draft resolutions.

11. The new procedure of a general debate on each item has had the effect of delaying the submission of draft resolutions. Rule 20 of the rules of procedure states that: "All items proposed for inclusion in the agenda shall be accompanied by an explanatory memorandum and, if possible, by basic documents or by a draft resolution."

12. It is now very rare for a draft resolution to be put forward at the same time as the item is introduced. As a result, the time spent on submitting resolutions, whether by the proposer of the item or by other Members, often prolongs consideration of the item by several days, or even several weeks.

13. Experience has shown, however, that it is much easier to discuss an item on the basis of previously submitted draft resolutions because, in this way, the proposer of the item gives a specific indication of what he expects from the General Assembly at the end of the debate on that item.

14. It would therefore be useful if we could return to the original practice, which would facilitate discussion of agenda items and would make it possible to save a good deal of time. There should, therefore, be only one

discussion on each item, based on draft resolutions submitted previously in accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure.

(b) *Elimination of the general debate on certain items*

15. Certain important items appear one year after another, and each time they are the subject of a long debate, which is often not more than a repetition of the debates in previous years, at least as far as the substance is concerned.

16. The following items may be cited as examples: race conflict in South Africa, treatment of people of Indian and Indo-Pakistan origin in the Republic of South Africa, disarmament, and prohibition of nuclear weapon tests.

17. These are generally items on which delegations have made their position quite clear at previous sessions, and they usually reiterate their views at each session during the general debate in the plenary General Assembly. It is reasonable, therefore, to question whether it is really necessary for the consideration of such items in Committee to take the form of a double debate: a general debate followed by a debate on the draft resolutions. The discussion in Committee could usefully be limited to a debate on the draft resolutions submitted in connexion with the item.

18. It is therefore suggested that on any questions of this kind, which come up every year, there should be no general debate in Committee, and that the discussion should be confined solely to a debate on the relevant draft resolutions, although all delegations would be entitled in the course of it to recall the general position of their Government.

19. This procedure, of course, would not apply in the case of items which come before the General Assembly with a report submitted by a special committee appointed at a previous session, when the report needs to be considered and discussed.

20. When the General Committee, in accordance with rule 21 of the rules of procedure, makes recommendations to the General Assembly on the inclusion of an item in the agenda and its allocation to the appropriate Committee, it could add a supplementary recommendation that there should be no general debate on the item, but that there should be a full debate on the relevant draft resolutions.

(c) *Grouping of items on the provisional agenda dealing with the same problem*

21. Experience shows that two or three items of the provisional agenda often deal with different aspects of the same problem. The result is that there are as many general debates as there are items, although the substance of these debates and the principles invoked in them may differ hardly at all.

22. This is the case, for example, with the items "Question of race conflict in South Africa" and "Treatment of people of Indian and Indo-Pakistan origin in the Republic of South Africa", and, similarly, with "The situation in Angola: report of the Sub-Committee established by General Assembly resolution 1603 (XV)" and "Problem raised by the situation of Angolan refugees in the Congo".

23. The provisional agenda of the General Assembly as proposed by the Secretary-General already suggests certain groupings of items on the basis of their inter-relationship.

24. It would be a good idea, for the sake of efficiency and in order to save time, to group all the provisional agenda items relating to a single problem together, as one item, so that there would be only one general debate covering the whole problem, while draft resolutions could be submitted on each aspect of the problem as raised in the various items within the group.

(d) *Meetings of the First Committee and of the Special Political Committee*

25. It has become the practice for the First Committee and the Special Political Committee not to begin their meetings until the conclusion of the general debate in plenary, a practice which is not based on any of the rules of procedure. However, at the beginning of their work, these two Committees cannot avoid a procedural debate—which, in the case of the First Committee, for example, took fifteen meetings at the sixteenth session—to establish the order in which the items allocated to those Committees are to be discussed. In principle, this procedural debate should not touch on the substance of the items in question. There is, therefore, no reason why it should not take place during the general debate in plenary and be completed before the conclusion of that debate. This procedure would have the merit of saving valuable time. It would also enable all delegations to be prepared, in good time, for the discussion of the first question to be considered by each of the two Committees. It does not seem to me that this would in any way interfere with the general debate in plenary.

26. It accordingly seems eminently desirable that the First Committee and the Special Political Committee should meet as soon as possible during the general debate in plenary in order to establish the order of priority of the various items allocated to them.

(e) *Explanation of vote*

27. It would also help to speed up the Assembly's work if the right of explanation of vote were used only for its true purpose. In the early years, the Committee debates on an item were often repeated *in extenso* when the Committee's reports were taken up in plenary. In order to end this practice, save in exceptional cases, rule 68 of the rules of procedure was adopted, which states that the approval of one third of the Members is necessary for a question discussed by a Committee to be discussed in plenary.

28. In practice, such a discussion has hardly ever been requested and consideration of the Committees' reports in plenary has been limited to explanations of votes.

29. Nevertheless, it would help the Assembly in its work and would be to the advantage of all delegations if such explanations were confined to a statement of the position of the delegation concerned with respect to its vote, and were not made the occasion for a further exhaustive discussion of the item, possibly referring to

the positions taken by other delegations. It was precisely in order to avoid such situations that it was originally suggested, I think, that there should be a time-limit of seven minutes on explanations of votes. Explanations of votes before the vote should be allowed for those already entered on the list of speakers before the list is closed, in accordance with rule 75 of the rules of procedure without prejudice, of course, to the right of any delegation to explain its vote after the vote.

(f) *Right of reply*

30. It would be in the interests of orderly procedure if, during the general debate in plenary, the right of reply was granted to speakers at the end and not in the middle of each meeting.

III. *Conclusions*

31. Those are the remarks and comments which I have been led, as a result of my experience and my term of office as President of the sixteenth session of the General Assembly, to make to the delegations of Member States, submitting for their consideration in this memorandum certain practical and flexible procedures which could be adopted in organizing the work of future sessions.

32. It seems to me that these suggestions would appreciably improve the methods and procedures of the General Assembly in such a way as to simplify its work and enable it to save valuable time, without in any way limiting the freedom of discussion or the effectiveness of its decisions.

33. All these suggestions, with the exception of that concerning the opening date of the General Assembly, which requires an amendment to rule 1, are consistent with the spirit and the letter of the rules of procedure.

34. They are of a limited and experimental nature. Similar proposals, with the same purpose, may be put forward by delegations of Member States.

35. Being fully aware of the reactions which some of these suggestions may evoke, I should like to express the hope that those delegations which believe that the development of the United Nations—a result, in particular, of the growth in its membership—requires at least a readaptation of the methods and procedures of the General Assembly, will propose the inclusion of an item on this subject in the agenda of one of the Assembly's forthcoming sessions.

36. Until the General Assembly is in a position to make appropriate recommendations, it would be helpful if the Secretary-General were to arrange for those members of the Secretariat staff who have had practical experience of the procedure of the Assembly and its Committees to prepare a statement on present methods, practices and procedures, which will make it possible to gauge their effectiveness and to suggest any useful improvements which might be made.

DOCUMENT A/5165

Tunisia: request for the inclusion of a supplementary item in the agenda of the seventeenth session

[Original text: French]
[17 August 1962]

On the instructions of my Government, I have the honour to propose, in accordance with rule 14 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, the inclusion in the agenda of the General Assembly

at its seventeenth session the following supplementary item:

"Improvement of the methods of work of the General Assembly".