Workshop on the Working Methods of the First Committee of the UN General Assembly.

Millennium UN Plaza, 3 October 2004

Background note

**Introduction**

The purpose of this background paper is to present an overview of the consultation process on improving the working methods of the First Committee following the 58th session of the UN General Assembly. During these consultations a number of proposals have been tabled and there seems to be widespread agreement that concrete steps must be taken to enhance the effectiveness of the First Committee.

This paper sets out the concrete proposals that have already been made in the course of this process. The intention is to discuss them at the 3 October workshop with a view to reaching an understanding on which proposals are most realistic. It would also be useful to distinguish between which measures can be implemented right away, and which require a decision of some sort.

**Background resolutions**

The 58th Session of the UN General Assembly adopted a number of resolutions calling for measures to enhance its role and relevance. A key resolution was 58/126, “Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly”, which was a response by Member States to the question of how to improve the functioning of this body. In resolution 58/316, “Further Measures for the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly”, it was decided that:

- Each Main Committee shall give specific attention to the rationalisation of their future agendas by biennialisation, clustering and elimination of items, and make recommendations to the plenary of the Assembly for its decision by 1 April 2005.

- Each Main Committee shall adopt a provisional programme of work at the end of the session for the next session to help them better to plan, prepare and organise the new session and, in this context, review the documentation requirements.

- The practice of interactive debates and panel discussions shall be utilised or expanded, as appropriate, by all Main Committees so as to enhance informal, in-depth discussions and to bring together experts from various fields without prejudicing the progress of the substantive work of the Main Committees.

- The practice of “question time” shall be introduced, as appropriate, in all Main Committees to enable a dynamic and candid exchange with heads of departments, and offices, representatives of the Secretary-General and special rapporteurs.

- The web sites of the Main Committees shall be enhanced and thereafter regularly updated and their content maintained by the secretariats of the Main Committees.
• The bureaux-elect of the Main Committees shall meet immediately after their election in order to discuss the organisation and division of their work.

• With a view to ensuring the continuity and the effective organisation of their work, the incoming bureaux of the Main Committees shall, no later than two weeks after their election, meet with the outgoing bureaux in order to consult on and review issues relating to the efficient functioning of the Main Committees.

• Prior to the opening of each session, informal briefings shall be convened to discuss the organisation of work.

Resolution 58/41 "Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work in the First Committee" expresses grave concern over both existing and emerging threats to international security. The resolution underlines the role of the First Committee in dealing with questions of disarmament and related international security issues, and considers that improving the working methods of the Committee would complement and facilitate the broad efforts to revitalise the General Assembly. The UN Secretary-General was requested to seek views from member states with a view to prepare a report to the 59th session of the First Committee. It was also decided to include this item in the agenda for the upcoming session of the Committee. The Secretary-General has received replies from a number of States, and their views are to be found in document A/59/132.

Informal consultations

Ambassador Sareva's non-paper and informal consultations
In February 2004 the Chair of the 58th session of the First Committee, Ambassador Jarmo Sareva, circulated a non-paper on "Measures to improve the First Committee's working methods". This paper describes the UN General Assembly as an underperforming organ for policy-making, and states that the First Committee is no exception. The vacuum in multilateral arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation efforts is being filled by the Security Council and by ad hoc arrangements, as the issues in question are too important to be left unattended. In response to this challenge the non-paper calls for a series of small, concrete and pragmatic steps. We must be careful not to make the best the enemy of the good, but do what is realistic. Ambassador Sareva also underlined that while the First Committee is responsible for its own housekeeping, reform of the Committee must be undertaken in the overall context of revitalising the General Assembly.

On this basis Ambassador Sareva suggested that the general debates of the First Committee could be shortened to only a week; that the general debate could be followed by a short interactive segment; that a rolling speakers' list should be established; that Member States should explain their positions or votes on consolidated statements on all draft resolutions and decisions in a particular cluster before action is taken on them; and that the agenda of the First Committee should be reduced to ten clustered items, which would be identical to the thematic clusters.

Ambassador Sareva convened informal consultations on these proposals in February and March in New York and Geneva. Most Member States supported the non-paper, and certain countries presented recommendations that went further than Ambassador Sareva's proposals, most of which are to be found in document A/59/132A and the US Note Verbae of August.
2004. During the consultations a number of Member States expressed reservations on the proposal to hold the session of the First Committee in February-March instead of October-November.

**The Oslo workshop**

Norway organised an informal workshop in Oslo on 8-9 December 2003 to explore ways of revitalising the First Committee and making it more relevant. The workshop was intended to be a constructive contribution to the debate on strengthening the UN General Assembly. It also provided an opportunity for informal exchanges of views on the situation in the Conference on Disarmament and the United Nations Disarmament Commission. Nineteen countries from all regions were represented.

The convener of the workshop observed convergence of views among the participants that the agenda of the First Committee must strike a balance between existing and new challenges to global security. Reform is not an end in itself, it must serve the purpose of strengthening global security. If it is to be constructive, the reform process must be open, transparent and inclusive, and proceed in a gradual, realistic and pragmatic manner. A distinction should be made between procedural and substantive changes.

The participants identified a number of possible procedural changes, such as learning from other best practices in the UN system, a rolling speakers’ list for the general debate in the First Committee, a shorter and more focused general debate, early appointment of the Chair and Bureau of the First Committee, the possible introduction of a “troika system”, thematic clustering of the agenda, biannualisation and triannualisation of resolutions on a voluntary basis, and more consultations with a view to merging resolutions on the same topic.

At the same time it was felt that more discussion was needed on questions like the duration of the First Committee session: How much effort should be put into reaching consensus on resolutions? Should certain issues be accorded priority? What role should the UN Secretariat play in the follow-up to resolutions? What role should civil society play in the deliberations of the First Committee? Is there a need for interactive debates or for sunset provisions?

**The way ahead**

There is consensus on the need for an effective multilateral approach in dealing with security threats. There is also growing agreement that steps must be taken to improve the working methods of the First Committee, and that they must be practicable and realistic. One purpose of this workshop is to identify what is feasible in the short term, so that these measures can be applied at the 59th session of the First Committee.

At the same time we must be ambitious. The momentum for reform of the First Committee must be kept up, and we should therefore retain a long-term perspective in addition to a pragmatic approach in the short term.

The following discussion points include both measures that could be implemented immediately and measures where further deliberations and reflections may be needed. Participants are invited to express their views and indicate how far these may be relevant for the 59th session of the First Committee.
• **Streamlining the agenda**

- A limited agenda clustered around a number of major items.
- Ongoing assessment of the relevance of the agenda to existing and new security threats.

• **A more focused general debate**

- A statement by the Secretary-General or the Under Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs presenting topics that deserve particular attention. This could be circulated in advance in order to enable Member States to respond.
- Establishment of a rolling list of speakers.
- Speaking time to be limited to five minutes. Member States could circulate a longer written statement.
- Statements by civil society to be allowed.
- A summary prepared by the Chair of the First Committee in his own name to be attached to the procedural report from the Committee.

• **Strengthening the thematic debates**

- A limited number of topics to be raised during the thematic debates.
- Each debate to start with an introduction by the UN Secretariat informing on progress in follow-up of previously adopted resolutions and in the relevant intergovernmental groups of experts. Introduction of "question time".
- Thematic panel discussions to be held.
- Member States to be encouraged to circulate in advance thematic discussion papers so that they are better prepared for discussions.
- Open and transparent consultations on the draft resolutions with a view to reaching agreement to be encouraged. Today such deliberations are not always conducted in a transparent manner.
- A thematic segment on the status of the multilateral machinery on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation to be considered. The segment could be used for discussing the Conference on Disarmament, the UN Disarmament Commission and the regional centres. The possibility of inviting the Chair of the Fifth Committee and the ACABQ to discuss allocation of resources to disarmament and non-proliferation could also be examined.
- One member of the Bureau of the First Committee to sum up each thematic meeting.
• A more transparent and consolidated consideration of the resolutions/decisions

- The efforts to reduce the number of resolutions through bi- and triannualisation, merge resolutions on the same topic and refrain from tabling only technical updates to be continued.

- More use of decisions on administrative matters.

- Member states to be encouraged to circulate draft resolutions well in advance of each session of the First Committee. This would enable Member States to conduct more substantive discussions on each draft resolution. The UN Secretariat could advise Member States in advance on the budgetary implications.

• Implementation and follow-up of each adopted resolution

- The UN Secretariat to be asked to prepare more analytical reports on the implementation of each resolution. These could be discussed in the thematic debates and in the "question time".

- Giving priority to consensus resolutions for follow-up and allocation of resources to be considered.

- Sunset provisions to be introduced for all UN activities generated by the First Committee.

Concluding remarks

The First Committee has for a number of years adopted highly relevant resolutions relating to the non-proliferation and disarmament of weapons of mass destruction. However, these resolutions have not been given adequate attention and are in many cases not implemented at all. For example, the Conference on Disarmament has not heeded the General Assembly's call to begin negotiations on a multilateral and non-discriminatory treaty banning the production of fissile materials. If this trend continues, there is a risk that the First Committee will become further marginalised.

Improved working methods would be an important contribution to revitalising the First Committee. It is also essential to restore the political relevance of the Committee as a venue for addressing existing and new security challenges. But the most important task ahead of us is to mobilise the necessary political will to use the First Committee as a forum for deliberations and for determining common positions on how to meet threats to peace and international security.