Coordination in the UN System

The UN system, which has been designed as an association of loosely connected organizations, requires considerable co-ordination efforts to limit overlapping, duplication and friction. The Secretary-General has realistically described the situation in his reform proposals of 1997 (→ Reform of the UN):

“The Charter provides that the United Nations should first draw in its work on a decentralized system of specialized agencies. Each of these agencies was established by a separate treaty among Governments and each is directly accountable to its own governing bodies. The United Nations authority over their policies and activities is limited, under the Charter, to making ‘recommendations’ for their ‘coordination’.”

There are historical, political and technical reasons for the fragmentation of the UN system:

Some specialized agencies are older than the United Nations (for instance the ITU and UPU); their full integration would have been difficult for constitutional reasons. Consequently, Article 57 of the Charter (→ Charter of the UN) merely stipulates that the existing specialized agencies shall be brought “into relationship” with the United Nations.

If the United Nations were to founder, which judged by the experience of the League of Nations could not be ruled out from the start, the work of the tech-
Coordination in the UN System

tical agencies should not be adversely affected (Childers/Urquhart 1994, 40).

The division of the system into independent units enables all states to measure out its membership (Membership and Representation of States) in accordance with its own priorities.

During the Cold War and the North-South Conflict the fragmentation helped separate “political” and “technical” problems. The blocs of states could deal with political controversies in the General Assembly and Security Council without jeopardizing the necessary collaboration in the various technical fields.

Establishing new organizations allowed a flexible response – as the examples of UNCTAD and IDA show – to the demands of groups of states, especially developing countries (Group of 77 and the UN; Non-Aligned Movement and the UN).

The different mandates and the geographical location of the specialized agencies require a high degree of independence. Full integration of all sectorial, thematic and regional functions into a single hierarchical structure under central leadership and control would have created an even more unwieldy bureaucratic monster.

According to Dicke this pluralism is a strength of the UN system (UN System), since it ensures “for multiplicity of political styles and political programmes, specialization of techniques and a less heavy and slow structure”. Furthermore, the research of organizations has given “sufficient evidence that the way of decentralization taken by the UN, is more adequate to the decentralized character of the international system than a centralized ‘world organization’ or international government could be” (Dicke op. cit., 388).

Critics, by contrast, claim that the specialized agencies have extended their programmes beyond their original mandate, and propose to redefine the responsibilities and priorities of each of the components of the UN system. In his 1997 reform programme “Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform” (UN Doc. A/51/950 of 14 July 1997) the Secretary-General suggested the establishment of a Special Commission, at the ministerial level, to review the Charter and the treaties from which the specialized agencies derive their mandates with the objective of examining how the weakness of the decentralized system can best be corrected while preserving its advantages. This proposal has not yet been taken up by the states community, since it is to be expected that it will meet with resistance even within member states. Childers/Urquhart observe that it has been possible for the diplomats of member-governments at the UN itself to call for greater coherence, while their own sectorial delegates to the specialized agencies have taken the diametrically opposite line championed by the agency heads (Childers/Urquhart 1994, 41).

The coordination in the UN system takes place at three different levels – within member states, between member states, and between organizations.

1. Coordination within Member States (Intra-State Coordination)

The responsibility for international organizations within member states rests with government departments and is usually exercised by the ministerial bureaucracy. The United Nations has not yet succeeded in being recognized as an independent field of politics, as is the case with European politics. Therefore, participation in the world body usually takes place within the context of specific fields of work, such as foreign policy, human rights, transports, drugs, health and nuclear policies, and is, thus subject to the pertinent pressures and conditions. To the extent that the fields of work of international organizations coincide with the areas of competence of governmental departments, the latter will also determine who is nationally responsible for a specific international organization. That is to say, the health department will be responsible for the WHO, the agriculture department for the FAO, and the foreign office for the General Assembly and the Security