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Q10

What are the main functions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)? Explain different functional commissions attached to it.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS II · 10 marks · International Institutions

Important International institutions, agencies and fora - their structure, mandate.

Core demand of the question

- State the main functions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and explain the different functional commissions attached to it
- Use the UN Charter, membership, and the named functional commissions

Revision summary

ECOSOC is a principal UN organ under **Articles 61** to 72 for economic and social cooperation.

Its functions are studies, recommendations, draft conventions, conferences, agency coordination, member reports, help to the Security Council, and NGO consultative status.

Article 68 is the base for commissions; functional commissions cover statistics, population, social development, women, drugs, crime, science and technology, and forests.

Regional commissions are separate geographic bodies under the same Council.

The old Commission on Human Rights was replaced by the Human Rights Council, which is not a current ECOSOC functional commission.

Introduction

The United Nations Economic and Social Council is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations. Chapter X of the UN Charter (**Articles 61** to 72) makes it the centre for economic, social, cultural, educational and health questions, and for coordinating the specialised agencies. Its functional commissions are the expert bodies through which that mandate becomes agendas, standards and reports.

Body**Main functions of ECOSOC**

- **Article 62** lets ECOSOC make or initiate studies and reports on international economic, social, cultural, educational, health and related matters, and make recommendations to the General Assembly, to members, and to specialised agencies.
- It may prepare draft conventions for the General Assembly and call international conferences on matters within its competence.
- **Article 63** directs it to enter into agreements with specialised agencies (ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, and others) and to coordinate their activities through consultation and recommendation.
- **Article 64** allows it to obtain reports from the specialised agencies and from members on steps taken to give effect to its recommendations and to those of the General Assembly.

- **Article 65** lets it furnish information to the Security Council and assist that Council upon request, which links socio-economic work to peace and security.
- **Article 71** is the Charter base for consultative status of non-governmental organisations, so civil society has a formal door into UN economic and social work.
- After expansion, ECOSOC has **54 members** elected by the General Assembly for three-year terms, on a regional pattern; it holds a high-level segment that now also reviews sustainable development follow-up.
- In short, its functions are deliberation, recommendation, coordination of the UN development system, NGO consultative status, and a bridge to the Security Council on the socio-economic roots of conflict.

Functional commissions attached to ECOSOC

- The Charter (**Article 68**) requires ECOSOC to set up commissions in economic and social fields and for the promotion of human rights; the functional commissions are those standing bodies.
- **Statistical Commission:** sets global statistical standards, including national accounts and SDG indicators, so that members report comparable data.
- **Commission on Population and Development:** follows the International Conference on Population and Development agenda - fertility, migration, urbanisation and reproductive health.
- **Commission for Social Development:** follows the World Summit for Social Development themes of poverty, employment and social inclusion.
- **Commission on the Status of Women:** the principal global intergovernmental body on gender equality and the empowerment of women, feeding the Beijing Platform and related conventions.
- **Commission on Narcotic Drugs:** the central drug-policy organ, working with the UNODC treaties on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.
- **Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice:** sets policy on crime, criminal justice and the UN crime congresses.
- **Commission on Science and Technology for Development:** advises on technology, digital divides and innovation for development.
- **United Nations Forum on Forests:** though styled a forum, it functions as the global body on forests under the ECOSOC umbrella.
- Historically the Commission on Human Rights was a functional commission; it was replaced in 2006 by the Human Rights Council, which reports to the General Assembly, a change students should not confuse with the surviving commissions listed above.

Related machinery (so the answer is complete)

- Regional commissions - ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA - are also ECOSOC commissions, but they are geographic, not "functional" in the narrow sense the question asks.
- Expert bodies on tax, public administration, and indigenous issues sit under ECOSOC as well; they are not all titled functional commissions.
- ECOSOC does not command armies or bind members like a Security Council resolution; its power is agenda-setting, standards, and coordination of agencies that States have already created.

Flow diagram

UN Charter Chapter X -> ECOSOC 54 members
ECOSOC 54 members -> Study recommend coordinate
ECOSOC 54 members -> Functional commissions
Functional commissions -> Statistical Population Social CSW
Functional commissions -> Narcotic Drugs Crime CSTD Forests
Study recommend coordinate -> General Assembly and agencies

Conclusion

ECOSOC's main functions under Chapter X are study, recommendation, draft conventions, conferences, coordination of specialised agencies, reports from members, assistance to the Security Council, and NGO consultative status. Its functional commissions - statistics, population, social development, status of women, narcotic drugs, crime prevention, science and technology, and the forests forum - are the standing expert engines of that mandate. They make the Council's socio-economic role concrete; they do not replace the sovereignty of member States.

Facts & figures

UN Charter Chapter X

Articles 61 to 72 on the composition, functions and powers of ECOSOC, including agreements with specialised agencies.

54 members

Size of ECOSOC after Charter amendment; members are elected by the General Assembly for three-year terms on a regional basis.

Article 71

Allows ECOSOC to make arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organisations.

Commission on the Status of Women

Functional commission that is the main intergovernmental UN body on gender equality, linked to the Beijing Platform for Action.

Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Functional commission that is the central UN policy body on international drug control, working with the drug conventions.