Opening 2018 Session, Economic and Social Council Elects New President, Adopts Provisional Agenda, Working Arrangements

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Declaring open its 2018 session, the Economic and Social Council elected by acclamation Marie Chatardova (Czech Republic) as its new President and adopted its provisional agenda and working arrangements for its upcoming session.

The 54-member Council — which serves as the principal organ for the socioeconomic and related work of the United Nations — also elected three Vice-Presidents:  Mahmadamin Mahmadaminov (Tajikistan) from the Asia-Pacific States, Inga Rhonda King (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) from the Latin American and Caribbean States, and Marc Pecsteen De Buytswerve (Belgium) from the Western European and other States.

Delivering her first remarks as President, Ms. Chatardova (Czech Republic) welcomed the enormous interest among Member States to participate in the Voluntary National Reviews.  “It proves that we take our shared vision of a better world seriously,” she said.  Noting several positive developments, such as unprecedented technological advancement and innovation, she said that nevertheless the world continued to experience rising inequalities in most countries.

If multilateralism was to stay relevant, “we need to take these challenges seriously,” she said.  The Council must continue to provide leadership on important issues in the economic and social realm.  The 2018 theme “From global to local:  supporting sustainable and resilient societies in urban and rural communities” would be thematically aligned with the 2018 focus of the High-Level Political Forum, “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies”.  Inclusion and participation was crucial for governance and institutions, as well as achieving targets in the areas of economic empowerment, education, health and gender.

“No human being deserves to be excluded from society,” she said, stressing that next year the Council would need to focus specifically on how it could further support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.  The Council must do more to ensure the participation of civil society and secure clear commitments from the private sector.  It was not possible to have development without peace and neither was peace possible without development, she continued, emphasizing the importance of improving and enhancing the capacities of national statistical offices.

Outgoing President Frederick Musiiwa Makamure Shava (Zimbabwe) said that over the course of the 2017 session, Member States and development partners expressed concern about the growing sense of retreat from global cooperation.  A palpable sense of weakening commitments to multilateralism pointed to a potential undermining of the pursuit of global peace and prosperity.

“This comes at a particularly critical juncture,” he said, noting the rapid changes in economies, labour markets and societies which continued to confound policymakers, institutions and communities.

The existential threat of climate change continued to loom large, particularly for countries in special situations, especially in Africa, he continued.  Spotlighting the work conducted during last week’s High-Level Political Forum, he said that the Council benefitted greatly from the knowledge and experience of civil society and welcomed the entity’s granting consultative status to some 460 organizations in 2017.  The Council was ripe for strengthening guidance it provided on sustainable development and for supporting a repositioned United Nations development system.

He also stressed the importance of collaborating with other United Nations bodies and said that it was essential to build on the contributions of the Development Cooperation Forum.  Such shared spaces were needed now more than ever to exchange knowledge and build trust.  He spotlighted the Council’s role as a multi-stakeholder platform for forging solutions to complex issues.

The Council had deepened its understanding of the nexus between peace and sustainable development, he continued, underscoring the interlinked challenges in the Sahel.  The Council’s Forum on Financing for Development follow-up was a success on all fronts.  “A critical piece of leaving no one behind is having good-quality data and statistics for reviewing progress,” he added.  The success of the Council must not be measured by the number of resolutions it adopted but rather by the impact it had on real people.  He also highlighted the critical role of young people, saying they continued to bear the burden of Government and market failures.

Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said inequalities among and within countries were deep and that addressing them was important for achieving sustainable development and peace.  International support for sustainable and resilient societies was based on the recognition that “we cannot overcome global challenges in isolation”.

Solidarity, shared responsibility and open dialogue were more important than ever, he continued.  The 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction together had formed an action plan for global prosperity and partnership.  The Council and its various forums had a key role in nurturing that vital opportunity by supporting implementation through the sharing of integrated and holistic approaches.

Supporting sustainable and resilient societies posed significant challenges for the United Nations development system, he said, underscoring that the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review had promoted coherence, efficiency and effectiveness to deliver results to improve people’s lives.  The 2018 cycle of the Council could promote that work, he said, calling on Member States to draw on their ingenuity, resources and political will.

In other matters, the Council also adopted its provisional agenda (document [E/2018/1](http://undocs.org/E/2018/1)) and working arrangements (document E/2018/L.1).

Prior to adopting the agenda, the representative of the United States said that the 2018 agenda and calendar was very similar to last year’s and did not seem to reflect the recent review of the Council’s work.  It would be important to conduct a thorough review and update its working methods and agenda to reflect the needs of the twenty-first century.  “Too often some Council meetings mirror or duplicate [the meetings of their] subsidiary bodies,” he said.  Low turn-out at some meetings showed that many Member States questioned their effectiveness and efficiency.  Member States could not afford to engage in duplicative negotiations, he stressed, also expressing concern that documents were not being distributed with sufficient time for review.

The representative of the Russian Federation expressed concern that within the framework of achieving the 2030 Agenda decisions were being made that affected the configuration of the United Nations.  The 2030 Agenda was critically important but it would not be logical if it was the only basis for which to change the main charter bodies.  The increased role for some participants during meetings must not encroach on the time allocated for others, he said, noting that during the High-Level Political Forum, the single minute allocated to Member States did not allow them to even pose questions to the panel while members of civil society were allowed to go over their time allotted.  Member States or civil society must “not compete for the microphone”, he stressed.

Speaking prior to the adoption of the working arrangements, the representative of Estonia, speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the Development Cooperation Forum must take place before the Forum on Financing for Development follow-up or at the very least before the High-Level Political Forum.  The outcome and recommendations of the former were critical to the effectiveness of the latter.

The representative of China said the Council and the General Assembly had their respective focus, with different agendas.  While some of the same items were dealt with by both bodies, the final results varied.  The mandates of the Council and the Assembly must be respected.  He also said that the Development Cooperation Forum must be held prior to the High-Level Political Forum and contribute to it.

The representative of Norway called on the Council Bureau to look carefully at how meetings were being managed.  Short and focused meetings were likely to enhance member participation.

The representative of Chile said his delegation remained flexible in reviewing and deciding on whether the Development Cooperation Forum should be held before the High-Level Political Forum.