The United Nations is an intergovernmental organization that has a well-defined process for accepting mandates for work from Member States. On the basis of General Assembly resolutions, the Secretariat organizes and supervises the implementation of the work of the United Nations. While the Security Council deals specifically with “threats to peace and security”, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) deals specifically with social and economic activities. All United Nations activities in peace, economic and social matters can be traced back to resolutions passed by one or more of these bodies. In this section, we will review the legislative mandates provided by ECOSOC and the General Assembly for the establishment and expansion of the United Nations Programme on Public Administration. ECOSOC, a body of 52 member States, authorizes actions to be undertaken under the Programme, and supervises the implementation thereof. From time to time, the General Assembly has reaffirmed its commitment to promoting sound public administration.

Origins of the Programme: 1946-1953

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations has been concerned with the needs of its Member States, especially those emerging from colonial rule. Public administration has been identified as a major factor in promoting economic and social development. Such concern emanated directly from the Charter of the United Nations, which declared the determination of the United Nations to “employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social development of all peoples”.3

From its first session in 1946, the General Assembly set in motion the process of providing technical assistance in the form of expert advice, fellowships, scholarships, demonstration projects, technical publications and seminars in various economic and social fields as requested by Member States. This was followed up by an ECOSOC resolution that recommended the preparation of a study concerning “the development of international facilities for the promotion of the science of public administration, so as to provide adequate training for an increasing number of candidates of proven ability on the widest possible geographical basis, but mainly from countries in greater need of access to the principles, practices and methods of modern administration”.4

However, it is General Assembly resolution 246 (III) of 4 December 1948 that is considered the first broad legislative authority for “technical assistance in
As public administration training activities developed as part of various economic and social programmes undertaken by the United Nations from 1947, ECOSOC felt the need for coordinating these activities and recommended to the Secretary-General in early 1949 the approval of a new Programme on Public Administration for the 1950s that should “coordinate” the various public administration training programmes authorized by the earlier General Assembly resolutions. This recommendation was acted upon by the General Assembly in late 1949 by its approving an Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance, which was launched in the middle of 1950. It included all public administration activities that were originally authorized by the General Assembly in its December 1948 resolution.

**Establishment of a Programme on Public Administration: 1953-1966**

Public administration activities in that period included training, expert advisory services, fellowships, seminars and publications. The management of these activities was reflected in the establishment of a separate administrative division of the Secretariat, and in the formation of periodic special committees to review the activities. Finally, the General Assembly, in 1953, approved the Revised Programme on Public Administration, which, for more than a decade, became the new legislative and programmatic basis for United Nations technical assistance projects in public administration. The resolution “formally recognized the status of public administration as a separate field in which technical assistance was to be provided”, and directly linked this type of technical assistance to “the purpose of promoting economical and social development”. During this period, three activities were carried out. First, direct technical assistance was provided to countries that requested technical cooperation projects. Second, several regional and national public administration centres were established. Third, a variety of seminars and workshops were organized and many technical publications were published for the benefit of all Member States. Activities established during this period continue today, albeit transformed as necessary.
Substantive components of the Programme on Public Administration

The main substantive components of the Programme remained unchanged, and public financial management was added in 1974. However, the emphasis on specific administrative topics shifted with subsequent legislative mandates. Broadly speaking, these topics included: governmental organization and administrative reforms, personnel administration and training, decentralization and local government, and supervision and management of information systems. As previously noted, since 1974 the topics of government budgeting, taxation and public financial management were also included in the Programme, when it was renamed the United Nations Programme on Public Administration and Finance.

Review of the Programme by the Group of Experts and the Committee of Experts

Before 1967, United Nations public administration activities were reviewed either on an ad hoc basis or as a part of reviewing overall United Nations technical cooperation activities. For example, a Special Committee was formed in 1950 by the Director-General of Technical Assistance Administration to study the role that the science of administration and administrative principles and practices could play in assisting United Nations agencies to help developing countries and specifically “to prepare a document which can serve as a guide for surveying the status of the public administration of an underdeveloped country; for identifying the steps that can be taken by a newly organized country in establishing its administration; and for determining the measures which might be considered by an older and more established country in endeavouring to improve its administrative system.” The Committee produced its report in 1951, published under the title *Standards and Techniques of Public Administration*, which served as the main guide for the next 10 years for the Programme and its experts as well as academicians and practitioners all over the world.

In 1967, the Programme was formally assigned the status of a United Nations regular programme of research and analytical work, such as programmes on development planning, population and statistics, thereby requiring regular and formal review of its activities. Thus, a Group of Experts was established to review the Programme formally every two years and to submit recommendations to ECOSOC. Except for some broad guidelines, the selection of members for the Group was left open in the expectation that the broadest possible representation would be sought from leading administrative systems of the world as well as from diverse types of government agencies. The Expert Group was a subsidiary body of ECOSOC and the Group’s recommendations were submitted to ECOSOC. In 2002, this Group was replaced by the Committee of Experts on
Public Administration (CEPA). ECOSOC passed a resolution in January 2002 to transform the “Group of Experts of the United Nations Programme on Public Administration and Finance” to the “Committee of Experts on Public Administration”, which would continue to be a subsidiary body of ECOSOC without any change to its mandate. This resolution also mandated that the biennial meetings would be replaced with annual meetings.

The United Nations General Assembly session of 1996

In 1995, the members of the African Group submitted a proposal to the United Nations to hold a world conference devoted to the theme of “public administration and development” to highlight the importance of public administration in the implementation of the commitments made by Member States at the various world conferences and summits held in the preceding years, such as the 1992 Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro, and the Beijing Conference on Women and the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development, both held in 1995. In response to that proposal, the fiftieth session of the General Assembly met in a resumed session in 1996 to bring to the fore the importance of public administration in development. The session, opened by the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, was attended by a large number of high-level officials, including prime ministers and ministers of public administration. The landmark resolution 50/225 of 19 April 1996 of the resumed fiftieth session provided a stronger conceptual and operational basis for the United Nations Programme on Public Administration.

In strong contradiction to the prevailing theories of the new public management, the Assembly emphasized the important role of the public sector in the development process and underscored that public administration systems should be well equipped with the appropriate capacities and capabilities. Therefore, it invited Governments to “strengthen their public administrative and financial management capacities through public-sector administrative and management reform, with emphasis on enhanced efficiency and productivity, accountability and responsiveness of the public institutions, and encourage[d], where appropriate, decentralization of public institutions and services”.

It was a message that openly contradicted the wisdom of the structural adjustment programmes in vogue with lending institutions. This message, as proven by subsequent developments, set in motion a process of rethinking the structural adjustment policies on the part of some financial institutions, particularly the World Bank. In fact, in the following year, 1997, the World Bank devoted its annual World Development Report to the topic “The State in a changing world”, in which it echoed a number of the messages sent by the General Assembly.
Other programmatic mandates: 1999-2002

The Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM) was entrusted by the United Nations General Assembly in late 1999 to bring public administration into cyberspace by developing the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN).

The General Assembly resolved in December 2002 to designate 23 June as United Nations Public Service Day to celebrate the value of public service to the communities and in recognition of the importance of a competent, knowledgeable and experienced public service in implementing national development strategies and attaining the Millennium Development Goals.

In 2002, ECOSOC expanded the role of the United Nations Programme on Public Administration to include the establishment of the United Nations Public Service Awards “to recognize and encourage excellence in public administration” and “reward innovation, motivate future initiative and selfless public service, and promote dissemination and replication of public administration knowledge and good practices”. It also decided that the United Nations Public Service Awards were to be bestowed annually on Public Service Day “for contributions made to the cause of enhancing the role, prestige and visibility of public service”. The awards were to be given in three categories: (a) improving transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the public service; (b) improving the delivery of services; and (c) application of information and communications technologies (ICT) in government and e-government.
Integration of mandates for public administration with other United Nations mandates

The United Nations requires its diverse departments and divisions to manage their programmes in the light of the overall goals of security and socio-economic development. For example, the legislative mandates for public administration required the Programme to align its activities with the themes of all United Nations “development decades” as expressed in the Programme for International Economic Cooperation of 1960 and the International Development Strategy in 1970, 1980 and 1990 and in the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000. The Group of Experts and, more recently, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration suggested ways of integrating these themes into the Programme’s work and subsequently reviewed the results and submitted their recommendations to ECOSOC and the General Assembly.

By examining the legislative mandates of the United Nations concerning public administration, it is possible to discern the concern of Member States about the central role of a capable, effective and intelligent State in galvanizing the efforts and resources of all sectors, including civil society and the private sector, for sustainable development.