

The United Nations Correspondence Classification Manual

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EQUAL weight may be given to various known systems in a theoretical *a priori* choice of a classification system for the active correspondence of a complex international organization. Practical considerations, however, are likely to indicate the use of a subject classification system based on the intrinsic logical interrelationship of the subjects involved in the activities of the organization as expressed through its correspondence. The great variety of United Nations activities and their unique nature make for a wide range of compounded subjects (further complicated by the use of several working languages) that defy the use of any system comparable to an alphabetical or numerical index. The system chosen, therefore, should be selfindexing and generally understood. Equally, the system chosen should not be based on the organizational structure, for it would not be pliable enough for an organization still subject to change and development. The logical subject approach should eliminate the necessity for revision when structural changes occur. This paper discusses the principles that have governed the creation of the current United Nations Subject Classification Manual and the Manual's main features.

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTRIBUTES

The purpose of the Manual is to make possible the classification of all United Nations active incoming, outgoing, and interoffice correspondence according to subject in a logical system that permits ready reference. The correspondence includes letters, memoranda, cablegrams, referral sheets, and—when appropriate—minutes, resolutions, and reports of United Nations organizations. (Formal United Nations “documents” are maintained separately from the correspondence and are administered by a separate office.) The Manual, which is written in English, is divided into major subject

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classes, the headings and themes under each of which are grouped and classified according to the intrinsic relationship of the subjects.

The major characteristics of this subject Manual are:

1. *Exclusiveness of breakdown of themes.* The Manual is divided into 11 major series (described below), each of which is exclusive of the others and inclusive of all the themes pertaining to it. The same principle is applied to the breakdown of the themes within each series. All further breakdowns are treated similarly, thus avoiding duplication and overlapping of subjects.

2. *Sources subordinated to subjects.* Because classification is made strictly by subject, sources are classified under particular subjects and cannot be classified parallel to subjects. Once a subject is broken down by source, it is broken down further only by source, but a source is never broken down by subject. Therefore, correspondence is classified according to its subject and not according to the source from which it emanates or to which it pertains.

3. *Independence of organizational structure of the U. N.* As the themes are arranged by subject, the Manual reflects the functions of the United Nations—the subjects contained in its correspondence—and not the organizational structure. See below.

4. *Functional approach for future expansion.* In order to insure that future development and expansion of United Nations activities might, as they occurred, be smoothly and harmoniously integrated into the plan, the functional approach was used in establishing the Manual. As this Manual was created when the United Nations had already existed for ten years, it was desirable to base it on the existing correspondence and the already manifested activities. The existing correspondence was analyzed and the derived themes grouped in a logical way by major categories into which they fitted naturally. The process of grouping and regrouping was repeated until the several main series emerged as a natural consequence; *pari passu* the minor subject groups and themes were enlarged in order to accommodate possible future expansion at all levels.

To facilitate the use of the Manual and maximize the benefits derived from it, it was believed that the Manual should have, *inter alia*, the following attributes:

1. *Usability.* The Manual is constructed so that it can be readily understood and easily used by both codifiers and departments.

2. *Ease of scanning.* The layout and sequence of themes show the overall scheme and the relationship of the various components at a glance.

3. *Simple language.* The language of the Manual is simple. Considering the varied linguistic background of its potential users, it avoids not only ambiguous phrases but also terms that, although similar or even identical in some languages, have in fact different meanings. On the other hand, apt phrases from languages other than English are on occasion translated and introduced into the Manual.

4. *Uniformity.* Descriptions, definitions, file notations, and titles are uniform in wording and type size and indented on the pages according to relationships and places in the system.

5. *Simple definitions.* Definitions are as brief and concise as possible.

6. *Clear titles.* Titles indicate the essence or main points of the correspondence to which they pertain.

7. *Selfindexing.* The Manual is so constructed as to be selfindexing by subject.

NUMBERING SYSTEM

The numbering system is a modified decimal system. The major considerations in the development of this system were:

1. *Basic numbers.*

(a) The system is based on recognized fundamental rules.

(b) It makes permanent control possible by (1) limiting the number of major breakdowns, thus checking tendencies to uncontrollable expansion, (2) imposing discipline and careful thought when opening new subject files, and (3) enforcing uniformity and consistency.

(c) It is expandable as well as pliable, as it affords almost limitless opportunities for further developments of the number (that is, the subject) breakdown. This elasticity is greatly increased by adding lettered prefixes and suffixes.

(d) The numbers reflect the relationships among subjects and indicate their relative positions in the series breakdown.

(e) The length of a number and its composition indicate the type of subject and how major or how detailed it is.

(f) Abbreviated letter prefixes are assigned to the main series as a mnemonic device. This device also makes possible the addition of completely new major fields of activity to the Manual.

(g) The digits written after the letter prefix appear in a group of three (PE 100, PE 110, PE 111); beyond that break, the zeroes are not written (PE 125/1, PE 125/11, PE 125/111), thus limiting the zero endings to main subjects for easy identification and at the same time avoiding unnecessarily long numbers.

2. *Case file numbers.*

The nature of case files—that is, the application of a subject to a special type or source—is reflected by their numeric designation, which is composed of the basic subject number and the case symbol.

(a) *Source case files* (by name, country, etc.) are designated by the name, or its abbreviation: *e.g.*, PE 000 OGS; PE 311/1 Australia.

(b) *Type case files* (by type of subject or type of source).

(1) *Simple case.* The type case files are designated by numbers placed in parentheses to distinguish them from subject numbers: AD 221/3(2). Case files are numbered consecutively in order not to limit their number under a subject: the (12) in AD 220(12) shows the twelfth case file under the subject designated as AD 220.

(2) *Complex case.* To indicate that the case is broken further by case, a dash is placed between the numbers: AD 220 (1-2) is the second case break-

down of case file AD 220(1). In order not to encumber the number, parentheses never contain more than three breakdowns: *e.g.*, AD 220(1-2-2).

3. *Special suffixes.* Where it is deemed necessary to distinguish the files as "Confidential," "Policy and Procedure," or "General," the suffixes "Conf," "P & P," or "Gen" are added.

TECHNICAL FEATURES

Certain technical features were specially devised for this Manual, in order to enhance its value and save its users time and labor.

1. *Index aids and guides.*

(a) *Index tables.* Each series is preceded by a table listing the main themes and subthemes (to the second and third breakdowns).

(b) *Label tabs.* Various label tabs, to indicate the series, major numerical breakdowns, and "lists," are attached to the appropriate sections.

2. *Page layout.*

(a) *Main series titles.* In the top left corner of every page, the title of the main series is listed, with every subject breakdown indented under it leading directly to the subject appearing in the text of the page.

(b) *Significance of indentation.* Subject breakdowns are indented under the subjects to which they pertain. Each successive breakdown (showing interrelationship of subthemes) is indented to an extent indicative of the relationship to the overall plan.

(c) *Case files.* Case files are indented to the center of the page in order to distinguish them clearly from the subject breakdown.

(d) *Numbers.* The numbers indicating the file code are listed on the extreme right of the page.

(e) *Date of issue.* The date of issue of each page is marked in the lower right corner of the page.

3. *Notes and definitions.*

(a) *Notes in text.* Notes and definitions are put at the bottom of the page; only in cases where they are an integral part of the subject are they written in the body of the text.

(b) *Appendixes.* If necessary to outline background information or special procedural practices, an appendix is added at the end of the series.

4. *Lists.*

(a) *Notes re lists.* Lists are not enumerated in the body of the text; a note indicates the existence of a list and its subject number.

(b) *Placement of lists.* Lists are placed at the end of each second breakdown.

(c) *List titles.* Lists are uniformly designed; each is headed by its title and carries its subject number, as well as full information as to its correct place in the Manual.

DESCRIPTION OF MANUAL

The Manual is currently composed of the following 11 series:

1. *Organization.* Correspondence on the structure and responsibilities of

the U. N., its Charter and organizational rules, membership, representation, and protocol.

2. *Administrative services.* Services provided by or for the organization, such as communications, publications, building management, supplies, and insurance.

3. *Finance.* Budgeting, income and expenditure, accounting, auditing, and remuneration payments.

4. *Personnel.* All matters relating to personnel, including duties and privileges, movement, and welfare.

5. *Legal matters.* Aspects of international law, treaties, and agreements; privileges and immunities.

6. *Political and security matters.* Measures for the maintaining of world peace and security and for settling international incidents and disputes.

7. *Social matters.* Problems relating to social welfare, relief and rehabilitation, population, and human rights.

8. *Economic matters.* Relating primarily to the international aspects of trade, resources, industry, transportation, fiscal questions, and statistics.

9. *Technical assistance.* U. N. activities in this field.

10. *Trusteeship and information from nonselfgoverning territories.* The international trusteeship system and problems relating to information from nonselfgoverning territories.

11. *Public information.* The media used, the substance of information released, and public relations activities.

PROCESS OF CODIFICATION ILLUSTRATED

Bearing in mind the major principles of subject classification, the actual codification of correspondence (that is, identifying it with the correct subject and assigning the code number) according to the new Manual is a very speedy process. As no subject can be found in more than one series, the determination of the final subject is made by a narrowing selection of the one relevant heading. The following example will elucidate this process:

An individual sends the United Nations a letter enclosing a monetary donation. From the 11 main series, the most logical series to select in this case is "Finance." The third theme of the Manual's financial series, designated "Contributions and Extra-Budgetary Income," FI 300, is the most likely theme to embrace the subject in question. This theme is broken down into two major subthemes: "Contributions of States Towards Ordinary Expenses," FI 310; and "Extra-Budgetary Income," FI 320. It is obvious that our sample subject is concerned with the latter subtheme. In turn, FI 320 is subdivided into several themes according to the type of extrabudgetary income; even the most cursory scanning would immediately lead to subtheme FI 323, which is "Voluntary Contributions." In turn this subtheme is subdivided; the first subdivision is: "Casual Cash Contributions and Donations from Individuals and Organizations," FI 323/1, which for our sample correspondence is the correct subject.

Following a logical process of elimination and aided by a format designed to facilitate surveyability, the correct subject is found within a few seconds, as can be seen in the following diagrammatic illustration:

FINANCE	FI 000
Financial Control	FI 100
Budgeting	FI 200
Contributions and Extra-Budgetary Income	FI 300—
Handling and Custody of Funds	FI 400
Salaries and Allowances	FI 500
Contributions of States Towards Ordinary Expenses	FI 310
Extra-Budgetary Income	FI 320—
Revenue Producing Activities	FI 321
Fund Raising to Finance "Special Projects"	FI 322
Voluntary Contributions	FI 323—
Transfer of Assets to the UN	FI 324
Income Derived from the Staff Assessment Plan	FI 325
Casual Cash Contributions and Donations from Individuals and Organizations	FI 323/1

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Manual involved a change from one system to another, accompanied at the same time by transition from decentralized to centralized subject codification of incoming, outgoing, and interoffice correspondence.

In creating the Manual, the organic growth approach was used, as the Manual, like the organization it serves, continues to grow and expand. It has been able to embrace newly developing major subjects, such as the peaceful uses of atomic energy or the creation of United Nations forces. It has been basic to modified classification plans for the active correspondence of offices away from Headquarters. The upkeep of the Manual, which now contains about 50,000 entries, requires constant tight control to assure that it is kept and developed on proper lines and remains compact and wieldy; this task is aided by continuous auditing of files and checking of codification.