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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

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Item 3 (c) of the provisional agenda

**Follow-up issues**

**Evaluation of the work of ESCWA**

**Summary**

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) has declared 2015 the International Year of Evaluations, during which United Nations and a broad range of other organizations will promote evaluation as a tool for boosting development. The Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) has joined this initiative and is strengthening evaluation processes in order to improve services to member States. It is also adding new systems of transparency and accountability for its evaluations.

This document presents the evaluation policy adopted by ESCWA for its programmes and projects. It also presents the evaluation cycle, the terms of reference of the evaluation team, the future evaluation plan and the role that the Executive Committee could play in this process.

## CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction .....	1	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
<b>I. THE EVALUATION PROCESS AT ESCWA.....</b>	<b>2-3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING .....</b>	<b>4-6</b>	<b>3</b>
A. Accountability .....	5	3
B. Lessons learned .....	6	4
<b>III. EVALUATION CYCLE AT ESCWA.....</b>	<b>7-13</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Drafting the terms of reference.....	8	4
B. Recruitment of an external expert evaluator.....	9	4
C. Submission of the inception report.....	10	4
D. Submission of the final report .....	11	4
E. Management response/action plan.....	12	4
F. Follow-up .....	13	5
<b>IV. LOOKING FORWARD STRATEGICALLY.....</b>	<b>14-20</b>	<b>5</b>
A. Evaluation plan and types of evaluations .....	14-18	5
B. The role of the Executive Committee in evaluations.....	19-20	6

## Introduction

1. The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) has declared 2015 the International Year of Evaluations, during which United Nations and a broad range of other organizations will promote evaluation as a tool for boosting development. The Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) has joined this initiative and is strengthening evaluation processes in order to improve services to member States. It is also adding new systems of transparency and accountability for its evaluations. Evaluations serve to inform decision-makers about performance and good practices. Although used to assess undertakings, they aim above all to assist in the improvement of present and future activities, projects, programmes, strategies and policies.

### I. THE EVALUATION PROCESS AT ESCWA

2. The first evaluation policy of ESCWA, which was approved in 2010 and designed to improve reporting on the Commission's achievements and assessment of the extent to which delivers on its mandate, laid the normative foundations for evaluations. In order to comply more fully with the standards established by UNEG and the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), ESCWA launched a thoroughly revised evaluation policy in 2014 and created the framework that guides its evaluative exercises.

3. Evaluation focuses on the question: "Is ESCWA doing the right things?" It examines the rationale for its undertakings and the satisfaction of intended beneficiaries. Evaluation also asks whether ESCWA is "doing these things right" by assessing how efficiently inputs are used to produce the expected results. Finally, evaluation asks: "Are there better ways of achieving the results?" and looks at

"An evaluation is an assessment, as systematic and impartial as possible, of any activity, project, programme, strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area, institutional performance, etc. It focuses on expected and achieved accomplishments, examining the results chain, processes, contextual ... relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions and contributions."

United Nations Evaluation Group

alternative approaches and good practices. Evaluation is essential to strengthening accountability at ESCWA, applying lessons learned and implementing its long-term strategic vision.

### II. STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING

4. To be effective, evaluations must be independent. At ESCWA, they are managed by a specialized team, the Strategy, Evaluation and Partnership Section (STEPS), which is independent from the projects and programmes under evaluation and supported by independent external experts. The external expert provides findings and recommendations that are used to strengthen accountability and continuous learning.

#### A. ACCOUNTABILITY

5. The following actions contribute to strengthening accountability:

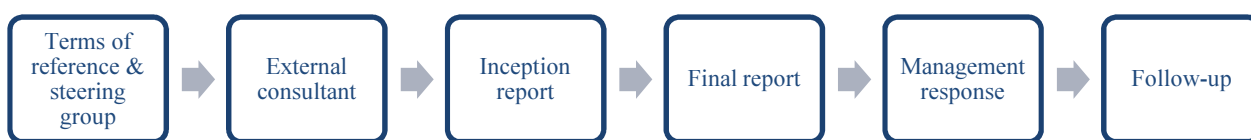
- (a) Assessing whether the work of ESCWA is in line with its mandate;
- (b) Verifying whether ESCWA is addressing the right challenges;
- (c) Ascertaining whether ESCWA is tackling regional challenges correctly in order to bring about change;
- (d) Reviewing whether there are better ways to advance regional economic and social development;
- (e) Determining the sustainability of results obtained by ESCWA.

## B. LESSONS LEARNED

6. The following actions contribute to ensuring continuous learning:
- (a) Distilling lessons learned from past experiences;
  - (b) Identifying strengths and weaknesses in the work of ESCWA and promoting creativity in addressing challenges;
  - (c) Improving work methods and ensuring that results are tangible;
  - (d) Changing the way ESCWA does business and works towards achieving greater impact;
  - (e) Refining the definition of normative work, policy advice and technical services;
  - (f) Boosting partnerships and resource mobilization.

## III. EVALUATION CYCLE AT ESCWA

7. In line with the evaluation framework of ESCWA, STEPS coordinates the entire evaluation cycle. This process can be subdivided into specific steps:



### A. DRAFTING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

8. STEPS prepares the terms of reference for the evaluation, taking into account key aspects such as feasibility, usability, cost benefit, impact and risk. A steering group that includes internal and external stakeholders is formed at the same time to provide overall guidance.

### B. RECRUITMENT OF AN EXTERNAL EXPERT EVALUATOR

9. In consultation with the substantive division and in line with the area of work to be evaluated, STEPS identifies the most qualified expert evaluator. He or she reports to STEPS in order to ensure independence from the division.

### C. SUBMISSION OF THE INCEPTION REPORT

10. The evaluator, having reviewed all background documentation provided by the division, prepares an inception report outlining the proposed methodology and key evaluation questions. The report must be approved by STEPS and the steering group.

### D. SUBMISSION OF THE FINAL REPORT

11. Based on data collection and analysis, the expert evaluator submits a final evaluation report with findings and recommendations.

### E. MANAGEMENT RESPONSE/ACTION PLAN

12. The substantive division, with the support of STEPS, prepares a management response to address the evaluation's recommendations. The response consists of a matrix in which each recommendation is accepted,

partially accepted or rejected. For each of the accepted or partially accepted recommendations, a staff member is assigned to carry out action proposed to address the issue identified by a specified date of completion. In the case of subprogramme evaluations, the action plan includes achievement indicators and takes the shape of a senior manager compact, which is signed between the Executive Secretary and the Director of the division concerned.

#### F. FOLLOW-UP

13. STEPS periodically monitors the implementation of all accepted recommendations and is responsible for integrating the findings and recommendations into future decision-making.

### IV. LOOKING FORWARD STRATEGICALLY

#### A. EVALUATION PLAN AND TYPES OF EVALUATIONS

14. STEPS develops a biennial plan for all scheduled evaluations, which can be divided into two categories: project evaluations and subprogramme/thematic evaluations.

##### (a) *Project evaluations*

15. Project evaluations assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of specific projects. They can be mid-term or final evaluations. Mid-term evaluations are usually planned for large extrabudgetary projects and allow for mid-course adjustments and improvements. Final evaluations are held once all project activities have been completed. The budget for evaluations is normally planned in the inception phase of the project and amounts to 2-4 per cent of the overall project budget. According to the ESCWA Evaluation Policy, all United Nations Development Account projects and extrabudgetary projects with a budget above 500,000 United States dollars must include an evaluation component.

##### (b) *Subprogramme/thematic evaluations*

16. ESCWA also carries out evaluations of its regular programme of work, whether subprogrammes/divisions or interdisciplinary thematic areas. In deciding which subprogrammes or themes to evaluate, ESCWA takes into account factors such as changes in staffing, reorientation of a subprogramme and the date of the last evaluation. Based on those criteria, STEPS defines the scope of the evaluation. Given the broader nature of the work being evaluated, most subprogramme or thematic evaluations focus only on three of the five criteria established by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

17. Past subprogramme evaluations have led to the preparation of senior manager compacts or action plans. As is clear from statements by the directors of the Statistics Division and Social Development Division, subprogramme evaluations have been used by managers to define new strategic goals and adjust their work programmes.

#### **Senior manager compacts**

Senior manager compacts are essential for ensuring continued learning and improved management for future results. They consist of a matrix including action-oriented points addressing each of the accepted recommendations. For each point, a staff member is assigned and a time frame is established. In order to strengthen accountability and learning, the Executive Secretary reviews implementation of the action points every six months over a period of two years.

- **Juraj Riecan, Director of the Statistics Division:** *“The evaluation of the Statistics Division helped us to redefine the role of the division. It led us to think more strategically and to prioritize our activities. For example, it showed us the importance of better integrating human rights across our services. The evaluation guided us to build better relations with member States by working more closely with National Statistical Offices.”*
- **Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division:** *“The evaluation of the Social Development Division led to a performance compact with the Head of Office. This compact helped us to develop a more strategic research programme and guided us on how to improve our communication with key partners. Finally, it showed us how to sharpen quality control when monitoring consultancies.”*

18. ESCWA has planned three subprogramme evaluations for the 2014-2015 biennium: the ESCWA Technology Centre, the ESCWA Centre for Women and the Division for Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues. Each will have a unique focus and new action plans will follow on from the resulting recommendations.

#### B. THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE IN EVALUATIONS

19. The Executive Committee may support ESCWA in two key areas with regard to evaluations:

(a) Reviewing the findings and recommendations of subprogramme and thematic evaluations: after each subprogramme or thematic evaluation, ESCWA proposes to share a summary of the findings and recommendations with the Executive Committee, thereby giving it an opportunity to offer suggestions (see annex 1, which presents evaluation briefs and examples of recently published findings from subprogramme evaluations);

(b) Making suggestions on the focus areas for upcoming subprogramme and thematic evaluations: for the 2016-2017 biennium, ESCWA has scheduled the evaluation of the Economic Development and Integration Division (EDID) and the Sustainable Development Policies Division (SDPD). The main areas of focus will cover:

- (i) The long-term regional strategies of SDPD and EDID, with a view to ensuring relevance;
- (ii) Extrabudgetary resources in SDPD and EDID and their absorptive capacities;
- (iii) SDPD and EDID intergovernmental bodies;
- (iv) Work by SDPD and EDID on technical cooperation;
- (v) Internal management.

20. ESCWA invites the Executive Committee to offer suggestions regarding the selected focus areas and other possible areas of assessment. Active support by the Executive Committee for the work of ESCWA on evaluations will contribute to greater transparency and accountability by ensuring that evaluations reflect the priorities of member States and boosting capacity to report on the impact of the Commission's work. The support of the Committee will also contribute to global efforts in the International Year of Evaluations.

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