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Sana'a, 26-29 May 2008

Item 8 (a-i) of the provisional agenda

MANAGEMENT ISSUES**STREAMLINING THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION**

*Lessons learned from evaluation of the sessions
of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies*

Summary

This document provides the background to the evaluation efforts undertaken by the secretariat on the conduct of sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies. The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the quality of the services provided by the secretariat to member countries in facilitating their consultations on key regional development issues. It also provides consolidated evaluation results from 18 sessions which took place from March 2004 to December 2007,* the key lessons learned, including identification of best practice, and the way forward.

The Commission is invited to review the document and to provide guidance on how the effectiveness of future intergovernmental sessions could be further improved.

* See Annex I for the list of sessions evaluated.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. According to its mandate, one of the main functions of the secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is to facilitate regular regional consultations among member countries in order to tackle key development challenges in economic, social and related fields, especially those of a regional nature; to share knowledge and experience between member countries; to forge common positions in response to the challenges and opportunities posed by development; and to promote regional integration and solidarity. To this end, the secretariat provides substantive and logistic services for the conduct of sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies.¹ It also reports the outcome of these sessions to the appropriate intergovernmental governing bodies: the outcome of the sessions of the Commission is reported to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the outcome of the sessions of the Committees is reported to the Commission for its consideration and action, as well as follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations made by the sessions.
2. To assess the quality of the services provided to member countries in this regard, the secretariat initiated an evaluation of the conduct of sessions in March 2004. At the twenty-fourth session (Beirut, 8-11 May 2006), the Commission was advised by the secretariat of the major findings from the evaluation of nine sessions, which had been held in the biennium 2004-2005.² Since then, nine additional sessions, held in the biennium 2006-2007, have been evaluated, bringing the total number of evaluations to 18.
3. Through this document, the secretariat wishes to share with member countries (a) the background to the evaluation, (b) the main lessons learned from the consolidated review, including identification of best practice, and (c) the way forward.
4. The Commission is invited to review the document and provide guidance on how the effectiveness of future sessions could be further improved through collaborative efforts by member countries and the secretariat.
5. The secretariat expresses its appreciation to member countries for their participation in the evaluation exercise and their invaluable feedback.

II. METHODOLOGY

6. As part of the United Nations system, the secretariat carries out all evaluations in accordance with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG).³ The evaluation of the sessions was conducted in an inclusive manner, involving both staff and delegates of member countries.
7. For the evaluation of each session, the secretariat collected feedback from participating member countries through the use of a structured questionnaire that included both open and closed questions.⁴ A copy of the questionnaire was distributed to the head of each delegation attending the sessions, who was requested to solicit views and comments from the members of his/her delegation and to provide a consolidated response to the secretariat at the end of the session. The purpose was to ensure that the response from each member country would be given equal weight, irrespective of the size of the delegation.

¹ These are the Committee on Energy, the Committee on Water Resources, the Committee on Social Development, the Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region, the Committee on Transport, the Committee on Statistics and the Committee on Women.

² See Consideration of ESCWA intergovernmental machinery (E/ESCWA/24/6(Part I)/Add.2).

³ For more detailed information on UNEG, please refer to <http://www.uneval.org>.

⁴ See annex II for the evaluation questionnaire prepared for the twenty-fourth session of the Commission.

The method of administering the questionnaire thus differed from that used in the evaluation of such other activities as group training, in which the feedback from each participant is considered essential.

8. The questionnaire comprised three main parts: (a) general questions on the intergovernmental meeting in question, covering attendance of the delegation, the importance of the agenda items to national and regional priorities and follow-up on the decisions taken at previous sessions; (b) substantive preparation and servicing by the secretariat for each agenda item, including questions on the level of satisfaction of the delegation with the preparation and presentation of each agenda item, the timeliness and relevance of documents, the quality of discussion, the opportunities for networking with other delegations and the quality of the draft report; and (c) a section inviting suggestions for further improvement of sessions, in which delegations were given the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations on any aspect of the session.

9. For each session, the responses from member country delegations were analysed and the main findings and lessons learned, particularly those issues of greatest concern to member countries, were compiled in a brief report, which was reviewed by the secretariat management.

10. As part of the preparation of this document, the secretariat re-examined all evaluation reports and related documentation⁵ from March 2004 to December 2007, as well as the two reports that had been compiled by the secretariat on the lessons learned from the twenty-third and twenty-fourth sessions of the Commission.

III. CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

11. In order to achieve consistency in the comparison of the evaluation results, the format of the questionnaire would normally be required to be the same for all sessions. In this case, however, the questionnaire has been modified and improved in the course of the evaluation period, based on feedback from member countries and regular consultations within the secretariat.

12. The fact that the secretariat felt it important to give equal weight to all member country responses by providing one questionnaire per delegation had some impact on the response rate. This could be accounted for by the fact that the need for the heads of delegations to consolidate views and comments from their members required greater time and effort on their part, and once the sessions had been concluded, it was often difficult for heads of delegations to follow up with their members, who were frequently from different ministries or government offices. Furthermore, the secretariat was unable to assess the extent to which the responses to the questionnaire reflected those of the majority within the respective delegations.

IV. KEY LESSONS LEARNED

13. From the consolidated assessment of the 18 evaluations, the following key lessons emerged:

Lesson 1: There was consensus among member countries that the agenda items matched both their national and regional priorities.

Lesson 2: There was consensus among member countries that the sessions are an important forum for them for networking and exchanging experiences on substantive issues.

Lesson 3: There was consensus among member countries that they were very satisfied with the administrative servicing and organization of the sessions.

⁵ Detailed analysis reports, agendas and annotated agendas of the sessions, and session reports.

14. The secretariat also noted areas which required improvement and has taken appropriate action as follows:

Lesson 4: Member countries wish to have more time allocated for deliberation on agenda items by keeping introductory presentations by the secretariat as brief as possible.

Action taken by the secretariat: The secretariat has issued guidelines for the preparation of introductory presentations by its staff and requested strict adherence to them during the current session of the Commission.

Lesson 5: While the Committee on Transport reiterated the importance of continuing to hold annual sessions, the Committee on Energy and the Committee on Social Development specifically requested that the Commission consider approving the holding of their sessions on an annual basis. The Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region expressed the need for its sessions to be held more frequently.

Action taken by the secretariat: The secretariat has included this item in the provisional agenda of the current session of the Commission, in order to consider the issue of the frequency of all sessions.

Lesson 6: The evaluation questionnaire from earlier sessions reflected the ongoing concern of member countries regarding the timeliness with which pre-session documents are received. Feedback showed that session documents had not been received early enough to allow for proper preparation.

Action taken by the secretariat: The secretariat addressed this concern by publishing pre-session documents on its webpage on the ESCWA website. At the same time, if delays arose due to unforeseen circumstances, the secretariat sent unedited documents to member countries in advance in order to circumvent the problem and facilitate their action. These measures proved effective and the resulting improvement has been confirmed by the increasingly positive feedback on the timeliness of documents which have been received since early 2006.

Lesson 7: Member countries repeatedly asked the secretariat to further strengthen liaison and cooperation between themselves and the secretariat in order to facilitate closer follow-up on the outcome of sessions.

Action taken by the Commission: At the twenty-fourth session, the Commission established a technical committee to enhance interaction and provide closer consultation between the members of the Commission and the secretariat. The Technical Committee will assist and advise the secretariat in making proposals both for the strategic framework and for the priorities of the programme of work, as well as following up the implementation of Commission resolutions. The first meeting of the Technical Committee was held in Beirut on 16 and 17 January 2008. The secretariat also maintains regular contact with the ambassadors of ESCWA member countries to Lebanon.

V. WAY FORWARD

15. With increased importance attached to evaluation as a tool for promoting learning and accountability, the secretariat intends to continue its evaluation of sessions. Since collective effort is required on the part of both the secretariat and member countries to further improve the effectiveness of sessions, the following proposals are made for consideration by the Commission as the way forward:

Proposal 1: With changes in the delegates attending the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, it is vital that future delegates have access to all documents and reports issued for past sessions. To ensure easy access to this information, the secretariat proposes improving the ESCWA website by making the archives of session documents available, including reports. The secretariat believes that this initiative will effectively address the concerns raised in lesson 7 in paragraph 14. This will require the secretariat to provide additional human and financial resources in programme support areas, in particular in the Information and Communications Systems Section of the Administrative Services Division.

Proposal 2: To further strengthen liaison and cooperation with the secretariat in response to lesson 7 in paragraph 14, member countries may wish to review their internal distribution channels for ESCWA session documents, solicit feedback from the ministries or offices concerned on how distribution channels could be further improved and share the outcome of these reviews with the secretariat. At the same time, member countries may wish to consider designating their ambassadors to Lebanon as head of the permanent missions to ESCWA. To this end, each member country may also wish to nominate a working-level focal point responsible for liaison with the secretariat on the work of the Commission.

Proposal 3: Member countries are invited to actively participate in the further improvement of the questionnaire so that the secretariat is able to obtain the information which it needs while reducing the work required from member countries in providing their feedback through the questionnaire. The secretariat may also consider proposing other methods of evaluation.

VI. ACTION REQUIRED BY THE COMMISSION

16. The Commission is invited to provide guidance on how the effectiveness of future sessions could be further improved through collaborative efforts by member countries and the secretariat, focusing in particular on the lessons learned, as identified in paragraph 14, and the way forward, as proposed in paragraph 15. The heads of delegations attending the current session of the Commission are urged to provide their written, consolidated feedback to the secretariat in the form of responses to the questionnaire that will be circulated at the beginning of the session.

Annex I

LIST OF EVALUATED SESSIONS

1. Commission sessions:

- Twenty-third session of the Commission, Damascus, 9-12 May 2005;
- Twenty-fourth session of the Commission, Beirut, 8-11 May 2006.

2. Committee sessions:

- Fifth session of the Committee on Transport, Beirut, 2-4 March 2004;
- Second session of the Committee on Women (Arab Regional Conference Ten Years After Beijing: Call for Peace), Beirut, 8-10 July 2004;
- Sixth session of the Statistical Committee, Beirut, 6-8 October 2004;
- Fifth session of the Committee on Energy, Beirut, 11-12 October 2004;
- Sixth session of the Committee on Water Resources, Beirut, 2-4 December 2004;
- Fourth session of the Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region, Beirut, 7-8 March 2005;
- Sixth session of the Committee on Transport, Beirut, 22-24 March 2005;
- Fifth session of the Committee on Social Development, Beirut, 29-30 March 2005;
- Seventh session of the Committee on Transport, Beirut, 17-19 April 2006;
- Seventh session of the Statistical Committee, Beirut, 7-9 November 2006;
- Sixth session of the Committee on Energy, Doha, 4-5 February 2007;
- Sixth session of the Committee on Social Development, Amman, 5-7 March 2007;
- Third session of the Committee on Women, Abu Dhabi, 14-15 March 2007;
- Seventh session of the Committee on Water Resources, Muscat, 20-22 March 2007;
- Eighth session of the Committee on Transport, Beirut, 27-29 March 2007;
- Fifth session of the Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region, Beirut, 24-26 April 2007.

Annex II
SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

EVALUATION BY DELEGATIONS TO THE TWENTY-FOURTH
SESSION OF THE COMMISSION

(Note: One questionnaire per delegation)

Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the quality and effectiveness of the twenty-fifth session of the Commission.

In order to receive the consolidated views of each delegation, one questionnaire is provided to each head of delegation.

Please return the completed questionnaire at the end of the Committee session to the Secretary of the Commission by handing it to the ESCWA staff at the registration desk. Should you wish to keep a copy of your responses, please ask the ESCWA registration desk staff to provide you with a photocopy of the completed questionnaire.

Chief
Programme Planning and Technical Cooperation Division
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia



PART I: GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SESSION

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Have any of your delegates attended previous session(s) of the Commission? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| If yes, please specify which session(s) the delegate(s) attended: | If no, please provide any further information: |
| 2. If your answer to question 1 is yes, do you think that there has been significant improvement in the conduct of this session compared to previous session(s)? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Additional comments: | |
| 3. Do you think that the agenda of the twenty-fourth session of the Commission and the deliberations adequately addressed topics of priority and importance to the ESCWA region ? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, all important topics were adequately addressed. | <input type="checkbox"/> No, the following important topics were missing or not addressed adequately in the agenda. (Please provide full details.) |
| 4. Do you think that the agenda of the twenty-fourth session of the Commission and the deliberations adequately addressed topics of priority and importance to your country ? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, all important topics were adequately addressed. | <input type="checkbox"/> No, the following important topics were missing or not addressed adequately in the agenda. (Please provide full details.) |
| 5. In your view, was there adequate follow-up between your country and ESCWA regarding the decisions of the twenty-third session in May 2005? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Additional comments: | |

PART II: SUBSTANTIVE PREPARATION AND SERVICING BY THE SECRETARIAT

Section 1: Policy issues

Please indicate the extent to which you found the following agenda items useful and adequately delivered by the Commission by ticking the appropriate box. Your comments will help us to improve future sessions, so please provide as much detail as possible.

| | | | |
|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 6. New challenges in the region and their impact on the work of ESCWA | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 7. Youth unemployment problems in the ESCWA region | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 8. Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA region: the Damascus Declaration | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 9. Review of the progress made by Yemen in the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries in the decade 2001-2010 | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 10. Which topics did you find most relevant to your country's policy and programmes? | | | |
| | | | |
| 11. Which topics did you find least relevant to your country's policy and programmes? | | | |
| | | | |

Section 2: Activities of the Commission

Please indicate the extent to which you found the following agenda items useful and adequately delivered by the Commission by ticking the appropriate box. Your comments will help us to improve future sessions, so please provide as much detail as possible.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 12. Programme performance report for the biennium 2004-2005 | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 13. Follow-up to the implementation of the resolutions adopted by the Commission at its previous session | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 14. The technical cooperation programme and regional advisory services | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 15. Mobilizing financial resources and funding | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 16. Report of the seventh session of the Committee on Transport | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |

Section 3: Management issues

Please indicate the extent to which you found the following agenda items useful and adequately delivered by the Commission by ticking the appropriate boxes. Your comments will help us to improve future sessions, so please provide as much detail as possible.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 17. Streamlining the work of the Commission | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| (a) Consideration of the statistics programme | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| (b) Consideration of ESCWA intergovernmental machinery | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 18. Proposed programme changes for the biennium 2006-2007 | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |
| 19. Draft strategic framework for the biennium 2008-2009 | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> To a great extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To a satisfactory extent | <input type="checkbox"/> To some extent | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all |
| Additional comments: If you felt that important aspects were not addressed, please provide details here. | | | |

Section 4: Organizational issues

Please indicate the extent to which your delegation agrees or disagrees with the following statements by ticking the appropriate boxes.

| | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 20. The pre-session documents conveyed clear messages about the issues on the agenda | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |
| 21. The pre-session documents were issued in a timely manner | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |
| 22. The secretariat's in-session interventions contributed to productive discussion, effective decision-making and recommendations by the Commission | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |
| 23. The Chair provided adequate opportunity to make interventions | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |
| 24. Overall, the session is a good opportunity for member countries to network with each other and to share experiences | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |
| 25. The draft report adequately reflects the discussion, decisions and recommendations of the Commission | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fully agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Partially agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| Additional comments: | | | |

PART III: ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICING BY THE SECRETARIAT

Please indicate your answer by ticking the appropriate box.

| | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 26. The level of conference servicing provided by the secretariat to facilitate smooth organization of the session was: | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent | <input type="checkbox"/> Good | <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor |
| Additional comments: | | | |

PART IV: YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Please provide any additional comments you may have on the Committee session and further suggestions on how future sessions may be improved:

~ Thank you for completing this questionnaire ~

Annex III**QUESTIONNAIRE FEEDBACK**

| Sessions (in chronological order) | Number of member countries participating | Number of member countries responding | Response rate (percentage) |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Fifth Committee on Transport | 11 | 11 | 100 |
| Second Committee on Women | 12 | 5 | 42 |
| Sixth Statistical Committee | 13 | 13 | 100 |
| Fifth Committee on Energy | 11 | 6 | 55 |
| Sixth Committee on Water Resources | 10 | 9 | 90 |
| Fourth Committee on Globalization | 12 | 9 | 75 |
| Sixth Committee on Transport | 12 | 12 | 100 |
| Fifth Committee on Social Development | 11 | 7 | 64 |
| Twenty-third Commission Session | 13 | 10 | 77 |
| Seventh Committee on Transport | 13 | 13 | 100 |
| Twenty-fourth Commission Session | 13 | 12 | 92 |
| Seventh Statistical Committee | 11 | 11 | 100 |
| Sixth Committee on Energy | 11 | 11 | 100 |
| Sixth Committee on Social Development | 12 | 12 | 100 |
| Third Committee on Women | 11 | 8 | 73 |
| Seventh Committee on Water Resources | 12 | 9 | 75 |
| Eighth Committee on Transport | 13 | 13 | 100 |
| Fifth Committee on Globalization | 12 | 9 | 75 |
| Average | 11.8 | 10.0 | 84 |
