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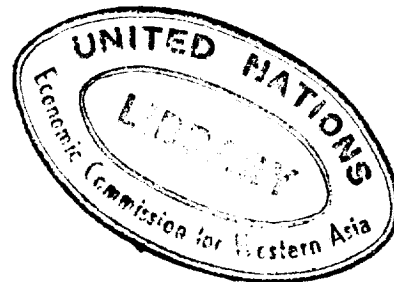
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THE ROLE OF REGIONAL COMMISSIONS
IN PROMOTING CO-OPERATION AMONG
THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

This paper depicts recent major developments in co-operation among developing countries and examines the role of ECWA in promoting such co-operating among member countries and between them and other developing regions. It also looks into arrangements aimed at enabling ECWA to play an effective co-ordinating role for the activities of the United Nations system at the regional level.

A. Co-operation Among Developing Countries:

In recent years the developing countries have shown great interest in furthering their mutual economic co-operation and devising appropriate means of establishing this co-operation on a durable footing. To achieve this aim, these countries have held numerous inter-governmental meetings both within and outside the United Nations system.^{1/} The Third Ministerial Meeting of the "Group of 77", held in Manila, in 1976, adopted a Programme of Action aimed at promoting economic development and creating new forms of action among the developing countries for the formulation of joint programmes in the sphere of industry, agriculture and essential services to broaden co-operation and economic integration at the regional and interregional levels.

^{1/} Reference is specifically made to UN General Assembly resolutions 3362 (S-VII) on Development and International Economic Co-operation, 3442 (XXX) and A/31/L.9 on Economic Co-operation among Developing Countries, ECOSOC resolution 2043 (LXI) on Strengthening the Regional Commissions for Regional and Inter-regional Co-operation, Resolution (1) of the Third Ministerial Meeting of the "Group of 77", the Report of the Governmental Experts of the Group; the Economic Declaration of the Fifth Conference of Heads of States or Governments of Non-aligned Countries and of the Report of the Mexico Meeting of the "Group of 77" on Economic Co-operation among Developing Countries.

The objectives and measures embodied in the Programme of Action are basically in conformity with the basic tasks entrusted to the regional economic commissions, established as institutions concerned with regional economic co-operation and development matters. By virtue of their competence and experience and the organs that they contain, these commissions possess the ability and flexibility to modify their work programmes in accordance with the wishes and aims of member States with regard to the achievement of greater mutual economic co-operation.

In line with the objectives of the Manila Conference Programme of Action, the Economic Commission for Western Asia prepared a working paper on projects for sub-regional, regional and inter-regional economic co-operation. It covers various fields of economic and technical co-operation, especially agricultural production and, primarily, food production in view of the fact that the region is a major importer of foodstuffs although it meets most of the preconditions for achieving self-sufficiency or, at the very least, reducing its dependence on foreign imports. The above-mentioned paper also touched on other issues such as increasing the volume of trade between Member States, efforts to remove restrictions limiting the increase of trade, regardless of whether such restrictions are connected with customs tariffs or methods of payment, co-operation and other fields of transport, communications and tourism, scientific co-operation and other fields covered by the Commission's work programmes. This paper, and those presented by some other regional economic commissions, served in preparing a joint position paper containing a summary of current and prospective projects aimed at promoting ECDC at the regional and interregional levels. This paper was subsequently submitted to the Conference of the "Group of 77" on Economic Co-operation among Developing Countries, held in Mexico City in September 1976.

The Mexico Conference, having adopted a whole series of objectives and measures embracing all fields of economic co-operation among developing countries, invited existing secretariats of subregional and regional groupings, as well as those to be established, to hold a meeting in 1977 with the assistance of UNCTAD, the regional commissions and other United Nations Organizations, to draw up:

- (a) Measures of support of concomitant action at the interregional level to be implemented by the developing countries as a whole;
- (b) Establishment of links among the regional and sub-regional groupings;
- (c) Facilitation of participation in co-operation and integration schemes of countries that are at present outside such schemes;
- (d) Consideration of a possible mechanism or a consultative body, whichever is appropriate, to co-ordinate and promote their activities with regard to the above-mentioned areas.

In preparing its work programme for the period 1978-1979, the secretariat of the Commission has taken into consideration the implication of these objectives and stipulations made by the Conference, as well as the related provisions of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in this respect, with a view to developing a more solid base for economic co-operation at the regional and interregional levels.

As part of the overall efforts to increase the effectiveness of the activities of the economic and social organs within the United Nations system, attempts are being made to support and strengthen the regional economic commissions in order to enable them to serve as effective instruments in promoting economic co-operation among developing countries at the regional and interregional levels, and to ensure co-ordination of the activities of the United Nations system at the regional level. The most recent resolution, in this connexion, was adopted by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations [E/RES/2043(LXI)] on the strengthening of the regional economic commissions for regional and interregional co-operation. In the third paragraph of this resolution the Council recommended that the Ad Hoc Committee on the Restructuring of the Economic and Social Sectors of the United Nations system should consider the following options:

1. The designation of the regional economic commissions as team leaders with responsibilities for co-operation and co-ordination of inter-sectoral programmes at the regional level.

2. The designation of the commissions as executing agencies of the United Nations Development Programme for future United Nations inter-sectoral, sub-regional, regional and interregional projects.
3. The delegation in full of the executing agency functions to the regional commissions of existing inter-sectoral regional and sub-regional operational activities.

In view of the importance of the provisions of this resolution to the role and activities of the regional economic commissions in general, and the Economic Commission for Western Asia, in particular, since it has been operating as a young commission less than three years ago, the Executive Secretary sent a copy of the resolution to the member States seeking their views and proposals in this connexion.

The replies received from Governments of some member States of the Commission contained valuable views and proposals regarding ECWA's role in co-ordinating the various United Nations development activities, at the national and regional levels, and in promoting economic and technical co-operation among member States of the Commission. They have been taken into consideration in preparing the 1978-1979 Programme of Work and Priorities of the Commission.

The secretariat of the Commission is currently preparing for the ECWA/UNDP regional meeting on promoting technical co-operation among the countries of the region. As the last of the regional meetings, it is in preparation for the global United Nations Conference on Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries, to be held in Argentina early in 1978. Parallel to this, ECWA, in collaboration with UNDP is involved in the preparatory work towards the establishment of an Information Referral System for TCDC at the regional level.

B. Arrangements aimed at strengthening the co-ordinating role of ECWA at the national, regional and interregional levels

1. Co-ordination between the Commission and (Arab) regional and national organizations:

Realizing that the countries of Western Asia exhibit similar features from most of the economic and social points of view and which form part of the Arab world which in turn is trying to achieve co-operation and economic integration among its member countries, the Commission has endeavoured, since its establishment to co-ordinate its efforts with the regional and national organizations concerned with development and economic co-operation in the region. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into details of the steps taken towards co-operation with these organizations - these details have been given in the reports on co-operation with regional organizations. Within the limits of its human and material potential the Commission is engaging in an exchange of experience with these organizations, to the extent possible, the Commission consults these organizations on specific activities in order to co-ordinate efforts, avoid duplication and ensure the exchange of documents and information on activities of mutual interest.

2. Co-ordination with development funds

Within the region there are numerous national and regional development funds which extend loans for the financing of development projects in countries of this and other regions, playing the important role of transferring surplus capital from the richer countries in the region to countries in need of financial assistance. In co-operation with the various regional organizations operating in the area, these institutions can constitute the principal instrument for financing projects aimed at achieving economic integration among the countries of the region. The Commission, in this respect, is endeavouring to achieve the greatest possible degree of co-operation and co-ordination with these institutions. Co-operation with them is currently taking the following forms:

- (a) These funds are undertaking the financing of certain studies and projects included in the Commission's work programme. For example, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development is financing the issuing of an annual statistical abstract covering all the Arab countries and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development has financed certain studies undertaken by the Commission in its member States.
- (b) Within the framework of a joint Arab Fund/UNDP project costing an estimated \$ 15 million, the Commission is contributing to the study and identification of economic and social development projects for possible financing by the Arab Fund and other financial institutions.

3. Co-ordination within the United Nations System

The activities of the United Nations organizations are presently being co-ordinated by bodies at the United Nations Headquarters, and in particular, the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination to which the organizations send all of their programmes. The organizations concerned also exchange their work programmes with a view to co-ordinating their activities. In the case of the Economic Commission for Western Asia, this latter process is further strengthened through the joint divisions established with the Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Co-operation with other organizations and specialized agencies takes place on a case-by-case basis involving joint studies and the organization of conferences or seminars.

Co-operation between the Commission and UNDP, which is the principal development financing organization for United Nations projects, is still, however, limited in scope. This is due to the fact that most United Nations development projects in the region are still national projects and thus do not fall within the Commission's terms of reference as an institution mainly concerned with projects of a regional nature.

In spite of the varying degrees of existing co-operation and co-ordination within the United Nations system, it is universally felt that a sort of inconsistency or duplication sometimes occurs in the activities of the United Nations organizations as a result of the complexity and multiplicity of the activities carried out by these organizations and also because of the overlapping, or rather the interrelationship of their fields of work. There is, thus, a need for more co-ordination of activities within the United Nations system, especially at the regional level. This situation prompted the United Nations to set up an Ad Hoc Committee for the restructuring of the economic and social sectors including the role of the regional economic commissions within the United Nations system. Pending completion by this Committee of its consideration of the various options of the Economic and Social Council's recent resolution on strengthening the regional economic commissions mentioned above, its adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations and the subsequent change in the terms of reference and the modification of the organizational structure of the commissions, what ECWA could do to improve co-ordination of the activities of the United Nations system at the national and regional levels may be visualized as follows:

- (a) At the national level: The United Nations development projects are largely being co-ordinated at the national level through the country programmes which are financed by UNDP. These projects are prepared by the governments concerned with the assistance of UNDP involving other UN bodies. It is possible for the Commission, on the basis of a request from one of its member States or from UNDP, to participate on a limited scale in the preparation of the country programmes, through the Commission's regional advisers and professional staff. These services would normally be provided for short durations in accordance with the usual procedure and in full co-ordination with UNDP. On the other hand, if resources under the Trust Fund for ECWA Regional activities, created from voluntary contributions, may be used for the financing of advisory services for longer periods a wider contribution to the process of preparing the country programmes could be made. This contribution would enable the Commission to obtain a deeper knowledge of United

Nations development activities at the country level which would, in turn, enable it to play an effective role in ensuring the avoidance of duplication in these programmes at the regional level and also in proposing projects of a sub-regional and regional nature.

The second field in which the Commission could contribute at the national level is participation in the preparation of national development plans formulated by member States on the same basis as already mentioned in connexion with the Commission's contribution towards the preparation of UNDP country programmes. The results of this contribution would not be limited to the mere co-ordination of United Nations development programmes but would also be an attempt at harmonizing the plans of member States to avoid inconsistency and broaden economic co-operation and integration which is an objective earnestly sought by member States.

- (b) Co-ordination at the regional level: The prime responsibility of the Commission is to support efforts aimed at achieving a wider economic co-operation among countries of the region. Co-ordination of the United Nations development projects is one of a variety of means to be employed by member States towards the achievement of economic co-operation and development. The ECWA region contains numerous national and Arab regional organizations and institutions aiming at the achievement of economic integration and unity among all the countries of the Arab world of which the ECWA region forms an important part. The Arab League and the institutions that have sprung from it and the national development institutions with regional aims are in fact playing the leading role in achieving the aims of regional co-operation as defined by member States.. The Commission's efforts and activities in this field should, therefore, be complementary to the activity of these institutions.

With regard to regional projects within the scope of the United Nations, it would be possible for member States to associate the Commission with as many projects of a regional nature as the Commission could undertake and to assign to it the functions of executing agency. In view of the recent establishment of ECWA and the circumstances which it has passed through since its inception and the fact that the principal effort in the development of regional co-operation in the area is being made by national and regional (Arab) organizations, the region does not as yet have any development projects supervised by the Commission. In spite of the above mentioned circumstances, however, the preliminary studies undertaken by the Commission and the projects included in its work programme constitute a fair basis for the development of co-ordinated action within the region especially in the field of food production, industrialization, communications and transport. In accordance with its work programme for the next biennium, the Commission is also preparing to undertake a comprehensive study of economic and social conditions in the region. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it will provide a clearer illustration of the region's needs and potential areas for co-ordination among its countries. With the end of the difficult circumstances and following completion of the first stage of its work programme, which has been mainly concerned with the collection of basic facts and information on the region, it is hoped that the Commission's activities will be extended into new fields leading to the formulation and implementation of development projects that will further economic integration in the region. The co-ordination of United Nations development projects in all the Arab countries is, however, beyond the Commission's terms of reference and all that the Commission can do here is to co-ordinate activities with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) under projects involving both regions. In this connexion certain practical steps have been taken whereby it has been agreed between ECWA and ECA that ECWA would undertake the following projects embracing all the Arab countries:

- (1) The publishing of an annual statistical abstract covering all the Arab countries;
- (2) the establishment of a documentation centre covering Arab States members of both Commissions;
- (3) the brain drain problems; causes, consequences and remedies.

In this way, it will be possible to co-ordinate and implement additional joint projects or studies which are currently being discussed with ECA in various fields of mutual interest. There are other proposals relating to the establishment of a centre for the exchange of information between member States and between ECWA and the other commissions and this proposal is in keeping with the project for the establishment of a documentation centre covering States members of ECWA and ECA.

Regarding the establishment of joint divisions in conjunction with regional and international development institutions, the evolving co-operation between the Commission and these institutions will eventually lead to a form of co-operation that may follow the examples of the joint divisions established with the Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. However, before taking any decision in this respect, discussions should be held with these institutions to sound out their views regarding the forms of co-operation that would be appropriate for the development and implementation of regional projects in the area.