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THE COMMISSION'S WORK IN THE AREA OF
INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Note by the Executive Secretary

84-0245

1. The past and present decades have witnessed vital changes in the developing world. One of the most significant changes is the identification of information as a basic tool for development planning and the realization of the need to create national, regional and international information infrastructures and networks capable of effectively generating information and transmitting it to its end-users.

I. LEGISLATIVE MANDATE

2. There is a recognized need for sharing organized information among national, regional and international systems as called for by General Assembly resolution 32/197, Economic and Social Council resolution 1981/63 and ECWA resolutions 60(V) and 70(VI).

II. ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY ECWA

3. The secretariat of the Economic Commission for Western Asia submitted to the first session of the Commission in April 1974, a project proposal for the establishment of an Arab regional documentation centre for economic and social development. The project was endorsed by member States. As a first step towards the project's implementation it was found necessary in 1975 to undertake a fact-finding mission to survey information facilities in the Arab countries with the financial assistance of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the Kuwait Fund for Economic Development and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Economic Development. The survey was completed in 1977 and its outcome confirmed the need for establishing such a centre. Consequently, a feasibility study was prepared in 1978 and considered by member States at its fifth session in 1978 (E/ECWA/57/Add.1). The feasibility study was revised in 1983. It was submitted to the UNDP in 1983 and to AFESD in 1984 for their consideration and financial assistance.

4. Although ECWA, was one of the first institutions in the region to foresee the importance of establishing such a centre or an information system, it was unable to launch it owing to lack of financial resources. Meanwhile, many national and regional institutions in the ECWA region developed their own information systems.

5. Among those that established their own systems, for example, were the League of Arab States and the Arab Industrial Development Organization. Furthermore, when other regional organizations, namely ESCAP, ECLA, and ECA, developed their own information systems, ECWA continued to remain behind in that area of endeavour. Consequently, at present, the Commission's ability to contribute to the economic and social development of the region is hampered by its lack of an effective instrument

for scientific research and the efficient handling of information.

6. In order to promote research aiming at enhancing economic and social development, it is essential that organized, efficient and up-to-date sources and means for handling such information are made available and accessible to ECWA research staff, policy-makers, researchers, government officials, experts, and students who are seeking solutions to developmental problems.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

7. In order to achieve its developmental role in the region, it is imperative that the Commission build, develop and strengthen its information infrastructure as has been done by the other regional commissions by: (a) centralizing information activities at ECWA; (b) establishing a computerized documentation data base; (c) organizing reprographic services; (d) developing policies, common methodological tools and standards in conformity with what exists in the region; and (e) disseminating information to users.

8. The system would attempt to achieve its objectives by collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating information utilizing the latest computer facilities and creating data bases for: (a) all the Commission's documents, including those concerning activities and programmes, (b) all developmental documents emanating from member States in the economic, social and technical fields, not processed elsewhere and that are of interest to ECWA and its member States for the purpose of serving correct decision-making, and (c) all other relevant information emanating from other developmental bodies.

9. In order to achieve its objectives efficiently the system would rely to some extent on national, regional and international systems and procedures which means that it would be engaged in preparing and translating when necessary directories, manuals, profiles, thesauri, and listings of its own materials as well as those of other national and regional organizations.

10. The system would publish reports of its activities, indexes and other material relating to its functions such as catalogues of its holdings, translated information and manuals, directories, manuals, thesauri, bibliography, brochures and directories of services linked with the centre, and/or available at the national, regional and international levels.

11. The objectives of the infrastructure include the creation of a network so as to: (a) encourage the exchange of experience and co-operate in solving common information problems; (b) improve communications and promote the information systems and services

provided by each of the national and regional institutions; (c) exchange information in the most efficient and modern way by means of establishing linkages (systems inter-connection with international, regional and national networks, data bases and documentation units); and (d) by designing an information dissemination system utilizing the most recent technology for data transmission, including telecommunications satellites.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission's member States could be instrumental in effecting the above-proposed information system by (a) providing the financial resources needed for engaging the required human resources; (b) releasing and exchanging information; and (c) encouraging the creation of this information network and linking their own systems with others in the region and that of the Commission in order to allow the optional exchange of information.