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MANAGEMENT ISSUES

EVALUATION OF THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION

Summary

The evaluations programme of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) seeks to improve the performance of the secretariat by planning and rigorously and independently evaluating the work of the secretariat and reviewing its internal structure to achieve the highest standards of effectiveness and efficiency. The evaluations programme promotes accountability, credibility and continuous learning. This report captures the efforts of the ESCWA evaluations programme during the 2012-2013 biennium.

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Introduction

1. Pursuant to resolution 312 (XXVII), “Evaluation of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia”, issued on 10 May 2012 at the twenty-seventh session of the Commission of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), member countries called upon the Executive Secretary “to continue efforts to improve the performance of the secretariat through, inter alia, evaluation of the work of the secretariat and review of its internal structure to achieve the highest standards of effectiveness and efficiency”. The resolution further calls upon the Executive Secretary to report to the Commission at its twenty-eighth session on the progress made in implementing this resolution.
2. The purpose of the ESCWA evaluations programme is to assess as systematically, rigorously and impartially as possible the following programmes and processes:
 - Seven subprogrammes and two programme-support divisions;
 - Development Account Projects;
 - Extrabudgetary projects over US\$250,000;
 - Internal business processes;
 - Intergovernmental meetings.
3. The evaluations programme aims at determining the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of subprogrammes, projects and processes and focuses on providing evidence-based information, enabling the timely incorporation of findings, recommendations and lessons into the decision-making processes of the secretariat.
4. The ESCWA evaluations programme is always forward-looking and seeks to provide management with the evidence and tools to manage for improved results. It seeks to inform all components of the results-based management (RBM) cycle, including planning, budgeting, implementing, monitoring and reporting. It also aims at enhancing the institutional relevance, optimizing the use of resources, providing client satisfaction and maximizing the impact of ESCWA’s contribution.
5. The comprehensive evaluation framework of ESCWA was established in 2010, when it developed its new evaluation policy, adapting to the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG). Since the establishment of this framework, the ESCWA evaluations programme has sought to promote an organizational culture that values evaluation as a basis for accountability and learning.
6. The present report captures the efforts made by the secretariat to improve performance through regular and ad-hoc evaluations during the 2012-2013 biennium. The report also puts forward a broad framework for the evaluations programme for the 2014-2015 biennium.

I. PROGRAMME MONITORING

7. In 2012, ESCWA undertook a review of its programme monitoring operations and initiated a process of integrating its operational activities into an RBM framework. It articulated a specific RBM strategy for the secretariat and established new guidelines for the design of the 2014-2015 Strategic Framework. By introducing a more coherent structure, leveraging the human and financial resources of ESCWA and putting in place stronger and sounder *modus operandi*, the ultimate aim is to enable monitoring for meaningful qualitative results instead of simply counting the number of outputs produced.
8. In 2013, ESCWA continued to enhance its monitoring capacity by adopting a comprehensive approach that considers the implementation of outputs across all budget lines. This is reflected in the assignment of focal points for each subprogramme, regardless of budget line, who review the totality of outputs and achievements, and in the inclusion of all outputs in the ESCWA Performance Monitor, an online database that monitors budget implementation against expected accomplishments. Starting in 2014, ESCWA will be

able to track in real time the progress in programme and budget performance of all budget lines jointly. This will improve the ability of the secretariat to find synergies and enhance the value added of the work of ESCWA across subprogrammes and budgets.

II. ASSESSMENT OF ESCWA'S EVALUATION FUNCTION IN 2010-2011 BY THE OFFICE OF INTERNAL OVERSIGHT SERVICES

9. In 2013, the results of the first evaluation scorecard for the 2010-2011 biennium were published by the Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (IED/OIOS). The scorecard is a dashboard-type assessment of evaluation practice in the United Nations Secretariat. It provides a snapshot of strengths and achievements and identifies areas where Secretariat departments need to further strengthen their evaluation capacity. The results of the scorecard are an opportunity for ESCWA to identify gaps and make the evaluation function a stronger and more integral part of its work.

10. Overall, and relative to other departments and regional commissions, ESCWA's results in this first evaluation scorecard are positive. Among others, ESCWA received positive ratings for having clear reporting lines, adopting an evaluation policy, establishing an evaluation work plan with follow-up mechanisms, integrating accountability and learning within the evaluation policy, and disclosing the 2010 and 2011 evaluation reports on its official website.

11. The scorecard rated other aspects of the ESCWA evaluations programme as "in progress". For example, it called for further efforts to integrate UNEG norms and standards in the evaluation policy, internalize evaluation findings and improve the quality of assessment reports.

12. The scorecard identified three specific shortcomings with regard to evaluations at ESCWA: first, the budget allocated to evaluations did not reach 1 per cent of ESCWA's overall budget as recommended in the UNEG norms and standards; second, evaluations were not perceived to be sufficiently used to improve results and strengthen accountability; and third, the reporting line as established in the ESCWA evaluation policy was identified as not being sufficiently independent.

III. SUBPROGRAMME EVALUATIONS

13. In the 2012-2013 biennium, ESCWA initiated the discretionary self-evaluation of two out of seven of its subprogrammes, namely, the information and communication technology for regional integration subprogramme and the integrated social policies subprogramme. The aim of these self-evaluations is to assess the effectiveness of the subprogrammes in implementing ESCWA's regular programme of work, its regular programme of technical cooperation, and its extrabudgetary activities. Based on the recommendations emanating from these reports, the following general recommendations can be made with ESCWA-wide relevance for all subprogrammes:

- Increase interdisciplinary work: Establish mechanisms to substantively increase intradivisional and interdivisional cooperation to maximize synergies and improve results;
- Enhance expertise: Assume a thought leadership role and strengthen the regional and global standing of ESCWA as a leading think-tank in the region;
- Outreach and partnership: Increase collaborative agreements and continuity of communications with member countries, civil society organizations and United Nations entities in order to strengthen key partnerships;
- Fundraising for key initiatives: Mobilize extrabudgetary resources to significantly expand subprogramme activities to meet regional demands;

- Use knowledge management tools: Introduce and institutionalize web-based knowledge-sharing mechanisms to maintain continuous and sustained communication with member countries, and to share past experiences and best practices with other regional commissions;
- Focus on gender and empowerment of women: Assign gender mainstreaming, empowerment of women and improving the status of women a greater priority across all subprogrammes;
- Capitalize on regional advisors: Reorient the role of regional advisors in order to strengthen the cooperative relationship with subprogrammes and to ensure that the work of the regional advisor is aligned with subprogramme objectives.

14. In an effort to strengthen accountability and create a results-based culture, the forward-looking findings and recommendations of the subprogramme evaluations were thoroughly reviewed, and detailed management responses were prepared to respond to each recommendation. This was followed by the articulation of specific, results-oriented and time-bound two-year action plans by the Executive Secretary together with the director of each subprogramme. These action plans, or compacts, will be basis to a biannual progress review against the implementation of the recommendations of the evaluations.

15. In the case of the statistics subprogramme, a thorough review was undertaken of the achievements of the first action plan that covered 2011-2013. Following consultations with senior management, it was agreed to review and adapt the action plan for the 2014-2015 biennium based on the achievements to date and the 2013 organizational restructuring of ESCWA. The new two-year action plan took into consideration the priority of data harmonization in the region and the importance of reliable and timely data for evidence-based policymaking. The main actions planned include developing a new division-wide strategic vision for 2016-2020, designing and launching a regional online database of economic, social and environmental data, and leading the Task Force on Statistical Coordination. The latter is an interim step towards creating a permanent mechanism for statistical coordination in the region.

16. In response to the recommendations of the subprogramme evaluations of the Information and Communications Technology Division (ICTD) and the Social Development Division (SDD), separate two-year action plans were prepared integrating specific and time-bound actions. In its Compact, ICTD committed, among others, to initiate efforts to establish a technical committee for technology and ICT, mobilize voluntary contributions to support its regular programme of work, and to establish ICT centres of excellence in member countries. SDD proposed to develop a six-year research programme in key regional priority areas, enhance interdivisional collaboration, strengthen regional partnerships, and strengthen the institutional framework for inclusive and social policies by collaborating with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

17. In the 2014-2015 biennium, ESCWA is expected to carry out three discretionary self-evaluations. The programmatic and thematic focus of these evaluations will be the subject of a senior management discussion based on a detailed review and risk analysis.

IV. DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNT AND EXTRABUDGETARY PROJECT EVALUATIONS

18. The ESCWA evaluations policy and the Development Account guidelines mandate the independent, external evaluation of every project funded by the Development Account, a capacity-building facility of the United Nations Secretariat set up to support the development agenda and global mandates of the United Nation.

19. Between January 2012 and December 2013, ESCWA completed the final evaluation and management response of two Development Account projects, and initiated the evaluation of another two. Based on the results of these four evaluations, the following conclusions and recommendations with ESCWA-wide relevance can be made:

- Stakeholder analysis and consultation: Broad-based stakeholder consultations with key partners and beneficiaries must be undertaken during the conceptualization phase of the projects to ensure accurate problem analysis and to secure political commitment and high-level buy-in;
- Mainstream ICT tools: Projects should capitalize on the use of such ICTs as online platforms, websites and e-rooms. These tools have proven to be useful for effective information sharing, strengthened collaboration between partners and enhanced project visibility;
- Enhance regional partnerships: Projects should maintain or strengthen cooperation with such regional organizations as the League of Arab States to create regional synergies and increase the impact and visibility of projects;
- Advocacy for sustainability: Projects should create an advocacy and output dissemination plan to raise awareness of project deliverables in order to enhance the sustainability of results.

20. During 2014-2015, another five Development Account projects led by ESCWA are expected to conclude their activities and will require a final evaluation.

21. The ESCWA evaluations policy requires the evaluation of extrabudgetary projects with a total budget of more than US\$250,000. During the 2012-2013 biennium, none of the ongoing extrabudgetary projects over US\$250,000 concluded their activities, and as such no evaluations of extrabudgetary projects were undertaken. For the 2014-2015 biennium, ESCWA has plans to undertake one mid-term and four final evaluations of extrabudgetary projects.

V. AD HOC EVALUATIONS

Divisional job audit

22. In 2012, ESCWA embarked on a job audit of the Programme Planning and Technical Cooperation Division. Based on a review of the Division's mandate and functions, the audit recommended a restructuring to enhance the Division's ability to provide programmatic guidance to the subprogrammes, to achieve interdisciplinary coherence between ESCWA's regular programme of work (RB) and technical cooperation (TC), to facilitate partnerships and resource mobilization and to strengthen the evaluation capacity. The restructuring responded to the recognition that these functions have, over time, been both diluted and dispersed across the organization. Under the proposal, staff were reorganized into two new sections: the Strategic Directions and Partnerships Section (SDPS) and the Strategic Planning and Monitoring Section (SPMS). In 2014, ESCWA initiated a follow-up review of the work of the two sections.

Organizational review

23. In 2013, as part of efforts to regularly evaluate its organizational structure, ESCWA initiated an organizational review of the seven subprogrammes. The key objectives of the organizational review were to examine the areas of work undertaken by the subprogrammes with a view to the following:

- Identify areas of work that overlap with the work of other organizations;
- Identify areas of work where ESCWA has a comparative advantage;
- Identify overlapping areas of work among subprogrammes leading to reduced efficiency and policy incoherence;
- Recommend the realignment of priorities within and among subprogrammes in order to enhance ESCWA's performance.

24. Among its key recommendations, the report called for strengthening the normative and operational work of ESCWA on issues of regional integration, building its capacity to provide econometric modelling services to its member countries, and enhancing statistical capacity and the harmonization of data as the basis for evidence-based policymaking. The report also recommended the articulation of a long-term vision for development based on social justice, prioritizing an interdisciplinary regional approach to the post-2015 Development Agenda, ensuring a stronger focus on technology, and streamlining gender issues across the work of the secretariat. Based on a collective review of the recommendations, the senior management of ESCWA has initiated their implementation.

VI. ASSESSMENTS OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL MEETINGS

25. ESCWA organized eleven intergovernmental meetings (IGMs) during the 2012-2013 biennium and held its 27th ministerial session in May 2012. For these meetings, ESCWA prepared evaluation reports based on customized questionnaires administered to heads of delegations, and conducted its own assessment based on a set of predefined criteria.

26. Overall, member States evaluated the IGMs positively. In 2012-2013, the ratings improved in comparison to the previous biennium, as all IGMs received an average rating greater than 4 on a 1-5 scale, reflecting a renewed interest of member countries in the work of ESCWA.

27. To spread lessons learned and best practices distilled from those evaluation reports, as well as to reinforce accountability, ESCWA will include, in its 2014-2015 biennium meetings, an agenda item on main findings of those evaluation reports and steps undertaken by ESCWA in response to them.

28. The following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from the evaluation reports to improve the conduct of future IGMs:

- Improving the timeliness of parliamentary documentation: It is considered important to provide parliamentary documentation to member States well before the meetings to allow for in-depth discussions at the national level with concerned stakeholders and, hence, allow for the development of an integrated national position on the topics. The use of such new means of communication as e-mails and dedicated websites was often cited as an important complementary means to disseminate the documents swiftly;
- Expanding and updating data presented to IGMs: The issue of covering all member States in the data and information presented in the parliamentary documentation has been highlighted in a number of IGMs, in particular with respect to the accession of new member States to ESCWA. In addition, presenting updated statistical data in IGM documentation was pointed out as highly important;
- Increasing the frequency of convening IGMs: This has been requested to address emerging issues in the region more effectively. In some areas of collaboration, biennial meetings seem insufficient to address the challenges that member States are facing;
- Enhancing interactivity among member States: It was noted that member States should be given more space to present experiences that are relevant to the meeting topics. This would enhance the exchange of best practices and lessons learned among them. It is important to shorten the time allotted for presentations and place more emphasis on discussions;
- Strengthening follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations: It was recommended that periodic monitoring and evaluation of the progress made towards the implementation of the recommendations and the decisions of the committees be done. The findings can be reported to the chair and bureau of the corresponding committee. The secretariat could also play a more proactive role in urging member States to fulfil their commitments towards implementing recommendations addressed to them;

- Deepening coordination between ESCWA and member States between sessions: There is a need to explore modalities to enhance communication and the exchange of information among member countries and between ESCWA and its members between IGM sessions, including through virtual meetings;
- Scaling up advisory services: There is a need to increase the level of technical cooperation services provided to member States, in particular to least developed countries, in response to recommendations of IGMs;
- Seeking the participation of eminent speakers during IGMs in their personal capacities to reflect on latest developments and emerging issues in the Arab region.

VII. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

29. In October 2013, ESCWA engaged the services of two expert consultants to conduct training on project design for staff across the organization. This training included a module on monitoring and evaluation to bolster the skills of ESCWA staff in creating effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

30. In November 2013, additional training on project management was offered to project managers and staff working on projects, introducing methods and techniques for project monitoring and evaluation.
