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UNITED NATIONS FUND FOR POPULATION ACTIVITIES

Evaluation of UNFPA projects

Report of the Executive Director

At the request of the Council, UNFPA is periodically submitting reports on the qualitative evaluation of its programme. The present report describes the work programme of UNFPA's Office of Evaluation and evaluations undertaken recently, as well as action taken by the Executive Director on their basis. It is suggested that the Council take note of this report.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted as a continuation of a series of reports by the Executive Director on the qualitative implementation, or evaluation, of UNFPA-supported programmes or projects. Such reports have been submitted to the Council periodically, most recently to the twenty-fifth session. 1/ The Executive Director informed the Council about the purpose and methodology of UNFPA evaluations, described and analyzed findings which were recurrent themes in the evaluations conducted during the then previous five years, and pointed to major problem areas in UNFPA's operations. The Council endorsed the approach and methodology adopted by UNFPA and requested the Executive Director to supply similar reports periodically in the future. 2/
2. The present report describes the work programme of UNFPA's Office of Evaluation in the past two years, and analyzes the findings of three major evaluations conducted recently and the subsequent action taken by the Executive Director.

II. WORK PROGRAMME OF THE OFFICE OF EVALUATION

3. The Executive Director appreciates the increased attention given to the problem of evaluation by the Governing Council, as well as by other legislative bodies of the United Nations, notably by the General Assembly, on the basis of reports by the Joint Inspection Unit.
4. In the past two years, the Office of Evaluation initiated nine large-scale evaluations. Of these, only three were completed during those two years, namely the evaluation of the regional population activities in Africa, implemented by the Economic Commission for Africa, the evaluation of the national family planning programme of Mauritius, and an analysis of UNFPA-supported research activities. In Part III, the findings of these evaluations are summarized. Six other large-scale evaluations, namely of the African Census Programme (consisting of eight individual censuses), the family planning and sex education programme in Costa Rica, two migration projects in Colombia, the population components of the World Employment Programme of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the maternal and child health and family planning programme of Colombia, and the regional population activities of the Economic Commission for Western Asia, are all in an advanced stage, but final reports are not yet available.
5. Delays in finalizing these reports are inevitable since evaluations require thorough preparation, including an analysis of the programme's objectives which sometimes are not fully spelled out. The preparation of evaluations is also sometimes hampered by the lack of information on the project implementation. The final drafts of evaluation reports have to be submitted to the countries concerned, the Resident

1/ DP/331

2/ Economic and Social Council, Official Records, 1978, Supplement No. 13, Decision 25/31, paragraph 11. /...

Representative of UNDP, and the Executing Agencies for comment, before the Executive Director can take a position on the findings. The time lapse between the beginning and the termination of an evaluation may therefore easily be in the range of one, to one and one-half years.

III. PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS EVALUATED

UNFPA assistance for regional population activities in Africa implemented by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

6. This evaluation was conducted in early 1978. While UNFPA assistance to ECA had been minimal between 1969 and 1973, it increased considerably in 1974, leading to cumulative actual expenditures for 1975 to 1977 of \$2.3 million. This sum does not include assistance given to the regional demographic training and research centres in Accra and Yaounde, nor any assistance given to countries in Africa directly, since the implementation of both these types of projects was, at that time, exclusively the task of the United Nations Office of Technical Co-operation in New York.
7. The Mission tried to assess the usefulness of the ECA programme and its impact on the countries of the region. Hence it visited ECA Headquarters, as well as the following eight countries: Botswana, Central African Republic, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zaire.
8. The report of the Mission was critical, more so vis-a-vis the Population Division of ECA, although the Mission recognized the Division's staffing problems, as well as its efforts to improve its work. The Mission was considerably less critical of the accomplishments of ECA's Statistics Division, and it had few comments on the work of the Social Development Division, since the latter had received only negligible funds from UNFPA.
9. For historical and political reasons, awareness of population issues raises very complex problems in Africa. They are aggravated by the very high mortality rates still registered throughout the region. The Mission found it therefore not surprising that in Africa the awareness of population issues as an important factor in planning is by no means high. This was why the Mission felt that all Divisions of ECA associated with population activities should continue to increase the tempo of work that will improve awareness both among Government officials and the general public.
10. The Mission concluded that, apart from the African Census Programme, ECA has made little impact in the countries visited, as far as population activities are concerned. The opinion was frequently expressed that ECA should become as operational in the population field, as it is in other fields. The Commission should seek out areas in which there is a potential need for assistance and advisory services.

11. The Mission felt that despite its imperfections, the African Census Programme has been the only reasonably successful population activity with which the Economic Commission for Africa has been associated since 1973, although earlier, the Conference of African Demographers in 1971 had been a landmark, and the first two or three years' work of the Population Programme Centre had helped to put population work on its feet in Africa. The ECA component of the African Census Programme is now located in ECA's Statistics Division, and although complex problems had to be faced in countries holding censuses for the first time, within ECA the Programme is a well-defined venture, in terms of objectives and also in terms of working methods for achieving those objectives.

12. In contrast, the ECA Population Division has been saddled from its early days, when it was known as the Population Programme Centre, with a far too ambitious work programme that has been well beyond the effective reach of the small number of professional staff. This has led directly to a lack of any real definition in terms of the work that has actually been tackled. As a consequence, the achievements of the Population Division are not as great as they might have been, although some progress has been made in the awareness-building phase of the objectives of ECA's population work.

13. The Mission felt that the Population Division must, above all, clearly set out its priorities and design a limited and well-defined work programme, which can reasonably be achieved with its small staff. This new work programme should derive from the original and still valid objectives of the former Population Programme Centre, and also take into account the views of African Governments on the work which the Population Division should be doing. The Mission members felt that top priority should be given to the establishment, on a worthwhile basis, of population information and clearinghouse services to be funded, in part, by the curtailment of research activities.

14. The second major priority for the Population Division should be the provision of demographic advisory services, largely on a sub-regional basis, to the countries of the Africa region. The Population Division also should provide backstopping for census analysis in the same way that the Statistics Division has provided backstopping for census data collection and data-processing in the African Census Programme. To achieve this, the Population Division should work much more closely with the Statistics Division and also be more active in the investigation of country needs. The Mission felt that the research activities of the Population Division staff should be curtailed. Research of a clearinghouse nature should continue, but the Division should be given funds for consultants who would undertake studies of, for instance, methodology in African Demographic analysis and African economic-demographic relationships.

15. The Mission made detailed suggestions for the restructuring and strengthening of the ECA Population Division.

16. The Mission concluded that for some years to come, intercountry activities would continue to play a crucial role in the African region and it made 69 detailed recommendations, e.g., that the work programme of the Population Division should be reduced in scope and size, and should concentrate almost entirely on the major priorities, namely adequate information and clearinghouse activities, the provision of assistance to Governments in organizing meetings, workshops and the training of demographic staff, and in backstopping of programmes of demographic analysis.

17. The Executive Director agreed with all substantive recommendations, except the one that the staff of the Population Division should not engage in research itself. In discussions with the competent ECA staff, agreement was reached on most of the recommendations which are now gradually being implemented. The Mission also made procedural recommendations, with a view to strengthening ECA's operations. Recent developments within the United Nations affecting the role of the Economic Commissions are in line with these recommendations.

National Family Planning Programme of Mauritius

18. In 1970, the Government of Mauritius and UNFPA signed an agreement for UNFPA assistance to the National Family Planning Programme of Mauritius. The programme has been extended through 1978 and part of 1979, and UNFPA expenditures were about \$1.5 million by the end of 1979.

19. The Evaluation Mission which visited Mauritius in February 1979 felt that the Family Planning Programme had been essentially successful in reducing fertility and in bringing a large proportion of the women at risk into the programme as acceptors. The gross reproduction rate, which was 1.49 in 1977, was still falling; but the rate of fall was now so slow that it was doubtful whether the Government's new target rate of 1.12 by 1987; at the latest, would be achieved.

20. It was estimated that about 60 per cent of couples at risk were participating in the public programme, or obtaining consultation and supplies through the private sector. Methods of family planning used in order of priority were: a large number of varieties of the pill; condoms; and the rhythm method (used by Catholics as well as some non-Catholics). There was little IUD insertion but increasing use of voluntary sterilization. Contraceptive ineffectiveness was evidenced by the large number of illegal abortions.

21. The geographical spread of maternal and child health and family planning clinics was regarded as good. However, the planned integration of maternal and child health and family planning services had been only partially achieved, the staff of the two services at the para-medical and nursing level being entirely separate.

22. Information about family planning was widespread, with about 85 per cent of the population having some knowledge about family planning methods in 1975. Education programmes on maternal and child health, nutrition, and population were not well developed in the institutions concerned.

23. The Government had not yet fully adjusted its social and economic policies or its communication strategy to the two-child family, even though such family size was implied by the targeted gross reproduction rate.

24. Mauritius has good registration, census, and clinical data, but more data analysis was needed. The Family Planning Evaluation Unit had been slow to initiate follow-up surveys of acceptors and drop-outs and to provide needed feedback to clinic staff; the cause possibly was understaffing.

25. The Evaluation Mission made some 70 recommendations, mainly addressed at the Government, all on issues of minor importance, and none aimed at changing the substance of the programme or its operations. The Government has accepted all recommendations and already started to implement them; it also agreed to the circulation of the evaluation report beyond the parties concerned, and the Executive Director is pleased to make it available to the members of the Council.

26. Shortly before the evaluation was conducted, the Government of Mauritius submitted a new request for UNFPA support totalling about \$950,000 for three years (1979-1982). The Evaluation Mission also made detailed recommendations on this new request and almost all were accepted by the Executive Director. UNFPA approved the request in a slightly modified form, totalling \$900,000, of which about 50 per cent will be for contraceptives.

Analysis of UNFPA's assistance to research activities

27. The Governing Council established last year a goal for intercountry activities to the level of around 25 per cent of UNFPA's total programme funding, to be reached by 1982. ^{3/} A substantial amount of intercountry activities has gone to the support of research, and considering the specific difficulties of appraising research requests, UNFPA decided to conduct an internal analysis of its past research funding.

28. The analysis, carried out in 1978, attempted to describe the research projects themselves, to assess the appraisal process of such projects and to analyze the dissemination of findings of completed research.

29. The analysis was conducted through a file-by-file study of research projects selected from a review of all UNFPA funded projects between 1969 and 1976. All analyzed projects were coded according to the criteria which would answer the questions listed above. The major findings of the analysis were as follows:

30. The major topic of analysis (fertility, operational research, biomedical research, migration, mortality, women, etc.) could not be determined for 70 per cent of the research projects because of insufficient information in the files, and the major purpose of the projects (to analyze data, plan research, develop methodology, or support research) could not be determined in 11 per cent of the projects.

^{3/} Economic and Social Council, Official Records 1979, Supplement No. 10., decision 79/28, paragraph 4. /..

31. The research projects were difficult to appraise because 43 per cent did not identify the gap in scientific knowledge that the research was to fill, 48 per cent did not justify why such a gap should be filled, 71 per cent failed to specify the variables that would be analyzed, and 76 per cent did not outline the methodology that would be used to analyze the variables. Allowing for projects not designed for data analysis and therefore usually not specifying variables or methodology, 66 per cent of the analyzed requests did not satisfy the criteria for indicating how UNFPA funds for research were to be spent. Of the completed research projects 28 per cent were followed by a written report. There was little evidence of wider dissemination of research results.

32. From the analysis it was concluded that requests for research projects have, in the past, provided insufficient information for determining whether there was duplication between research topics or whether any areas of investigation were being neglected. The analysis showed that, in the past, the appraisal process of research requests appeared to have been lacking in depth, and the standards of what constituted good research appeared to have been low. Most research projects were funded, although there was no documentation on whether the information was already available, whether the same research was currently being undertaken by someone else, whether the information was needed and how the research would be designed, the data collected, the analysis carried out, etc.

33. A third conclusion was that research projects, once approved, appeared to have been monitored with insufficient vigour or insistence that researchers carry out what they originally undertook to do within a reasonable time-frame. A fourth conclusion was that little effort to disseminate research findings appeared to have been made in the past.

34. On the basis of this analysis, recommendations were developed for UNFPA to strengthen its support to research. They referred to the manner in which research is formulated, appraised, implemented and disseminated. The Executive Director accepted the large majority of these recommendations. UNFPA Instructions for the Preparation of a Project Document were revised accordingly.^{4/} The Executive Director notes that, in the meantime, the quality of research requests has improved considerably, although further improvement is possible and desirable.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

35. It should be noted that the evaluations described in this report do not show different results from those reported in earlier documents, notably in DP/331. The programmes and projects mentioned in the present report also date back a number of years. However, the interim results of the evaluations conducted more recently, but not yet finalized, show consistent and steady progress in programme performance.

^{4/} UNFPA/19/Rev. 2 of 15 October 1978

36. The matters which continue to give major reason for concern are the design of projects and the lack of clarity of objectives. This observation is not unique for UNFPA; interagency meetings conducted in the recent past by UNDP have also concentrated on such problems. Similarly, the evaluation report of the Joint Inspection Unit which recently examined the performance of the United Nations system in technical co-operation with Sri Lanka 5/ lists faulty project design as the most important reason for the limited effectiveness of the technical assistance rendered by the Organizations of the United Nations system. However, new UNFPA instructions for the preparation of project documents 6/ have been issued, and their application shows signs of progress. Nevertheless, the Executive Director feels that these efforts should be intensified. Discussions with the Organizations of United Nations system are planned, with a view to developing systematic training of agency staff in project design. For purposes of cost-effectiveness, consideration will be given to close co-operation with other funding agencies, notably UNDP.

37. In conclusion, the Executive Director wishes to state that he considers the results of UNFPA's evaluations an encouraging indication of steadily improving performance, and that evaluations will be carried out with increased emphasis in the future.

5/ JIU/REP/79/16.

6/ UNFPA/19/Rev. 2 of 15 October 1978.