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P O L I C Y

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of measures to improve
programme and project quality

Report of the Administrator

Summary

This report is submitted in compliance with Governing Council decision 85/4, which inter alia took note of and endorsed the Administrator's proposals for improving the quality of programmes and projects financed by UNDP.

The report reviews the experience to date in the implementation of these measures and is submitted to the Council for its information.

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Introduction

1. As part of the preparations for the fourth programming cycle, which begins in 1987, and also in response to concerns expressed by Governing Council members, a series of internal reviews and discussions was undertaken early in 1985 to assess the overall quality and effectiveness of programmes and projects financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). While the assessment confirmed the validity of the basic processes pursued in programming and project development, it also indicated the need for improvement in a number of areas and led to a series of proposals designed to institute the necessary corrective measures.
2. Following his review of these proposals, the Administrator presented them to the Governing Council in his opening statement at the thirty-second session in June 1985. In its decision 85/4, the Governing Council endorsed the efforts undertaken by the Administrator to improve the quality of programmes and projects financed by UNDP. In July 1985, an action plan was drawn up for the implementation of the measures described in this report. The proposed measures deal mainly with two core elements of UNDP operations, namely (a) the country programming process; and (b) the project cycle in all its phases. To this effect, a number of institutional changes have been introduced at UNDP headquarters, while policy and procedural directives governing programme activities are being reviewed and modified as appropriate. It is expected that this process will, within the next 18 months, cover all substantive aspects relating to country programming and project work.
3. The Global Meeting of UNDP resident representatives held at Copenhagen in October 1985 provided a further opportunity for UNDP management to emphasize the paramount importance attached to the issue of programme and project quality and to brief resident representatives on the various changes to be introduced in programming policies and procedures.
4. The agencies have also been kept fully informed through discussions in the Consultative Committee on Substantive Questions (CCSQ/OPS) of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) of the United Nations system, as well as in the Inter-agency Consultative Meeting convened annually by UNDP. These discussions between UNDP and its agency partners have been generally constructive, and the agencies have indicated their commitment to co-operate in efforts to improve the quality of UNDP-financed programmes and projects.

I. BROADENING THE COUNTRY PROGRAMMING PROCESS

A. New programming guidelines

5. The underlying thrust of the various measures to improve the quality of country programmes rests on the premise that the Administrator's

accountability to the Governing Council for all aspects of programme activities requires that UNDP headquarters and field offices take an active part in each stage of the programme cycle, with special emphasis on the preparation stage.

6. The new programming guidelines which were issued in December 1985 reflect this emphasis on UNDP's role and responsibilities. They also address concerns voiced by Council members with regard to the content and format of country programme documents. Because of the long lead-time required for the preparation and submission of country programmes (final drafts must be available seven months before the Governing Council session), most of the country programme documents being submitted to the Council in June 1986 were already well advanced and hence could not take the new guidelines fully into account. Programmes to be submitted to the Council in 1987 will be required to follow these guidelines.

7. The new guidelines spell out, for the first time, steps to be taken in each country to facilitate the systematic consideration of all the funds and programmes under the responsibility of the Administrator in the programming exercise. Other possible sources of funds, both inside and outside the United Nations system, are also to be taken into account to the extent that Governments concur with this in a country programming context. The guidelines also provide for the development of a comprehensive project pipeline, including not only those projects for which indicative planning figure (IPF) financing is envisaged but also other projects identified during the programming exercise. This pipeline is intended to elicit the interest of other potential donors, thereby giving more concrete meaning to the notion of using the country programme as a framework for co-ordinating external technical co-operation.

8. The role of the country programme as a framework is to be further strengthened by more systematic consultations within the United Nations system as well as with bilateral assistance organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multilateral financing institutions. This is in line with the interest expressed by many countries, in the Governing Council and elsewhere, to co-operate with UNDP in joint programming at the country level wherever feasible.

9. A further feature of the new country programming guidelines is a greater emphasis on the systematic assessment of technical co-operation requirements and priorities as a basic step in the process. Based on such assessments, major objectives are to be defined, constituting the very structure of the country programme and allowing proper project identification and rational co-ordination based on linkages between the objectives of the programme. In view of the importance attached to this approach, the Administrator proposes to use Special Programme Resources for this purpose, and will seek the necessary authority from the Governing Council at its special session in February 1986.

10. The introduction of a new standardized format for the country programme document, showing the basic structure of the programme, will result in

greater uniformity and transparency in the documentation presented to the Governing Council. UNDP will also make available, to those member countries of the Programme so requesting, detailed listings of projects and other related data prepared as part of the various country programming exercises. This information includes: (a) ongoing projects; (b) proposed projects; (c) distribution of resources by objective; (d) planned activities of operational funds and programmes under the authority of the Administrator; and (e) distribution of the new country programme by sector.

11. Directives with regard to annual and mid-term reviews of country programmes will be issued in conjunction with the revision of the UNDP Policies and Procedures Manual (see chapter III.A below).

B. Programme Review Committee

12. A central Programme Review Committee (PRC) has been established to review all country programmes whose combined IPF and other resources are above \$10 million. The corresponding notes by the Administrator submitting these programmes to the Governing Council are also reviewed by the Committee. Country programmes under \$10 million may also be reviewed by PRC, either at the recommendation of the Regional Bureau concerned or at the Committee's own initiative. In such cases, PRC may decide that there should be corresponding notes by the Administrator.

13. The Committee has been given a set of terms of reference defining its responsibilities, composition and procedures. While the initial review process is the responsibility of the resident representatives and the regional bureaux, PRC supplements this process with a final review by senior officials at UNDP headquarters, including some who do not have immediate management or operational responsibility for country programmes.

14. PRC began to function in September 1985 and by year-end had reviewed 17 country programmes and 1 regional programme. Most of the programmes were found to be well prepared and thus acceptable, subject to some clarifications and modifications, while others did not fully meet the desired quality standards as reflected in existing policy and procedural directives. It is the general view of all participants at PRC that the new mechanism has substantially improved the review process of country programmes at UNDP headquarters. In all cases, the resident representative conveyed the Committee's views to the Government concerned, and the Administrator confirms that the improvements and modifications sought by PRC have been taken into account in the final versions of the country programme documents being presented to the Council in 1986.

15. In reviewing country programmes, the Administrator is mindful of the fact that they are the programmes of the Governments concerned and are submitted as such by the Administrator to the Governing Council for its consideration. However, the question of national prerogatives must be viewed in perspective and balanced against the Administrator's accountability to the

Council, as stated explicitly in the Consensus (General Assembly resolution 2688 (XXV), paras. 30, 37 and 56) and recently reaffirmed by the Council in its decision 85/4. Therefore, in order to make soundly based recommendations to the Council on country programmes, it is necessary that they first be thoroughly and objectively scrutinized. The review process has now been substantially strengthened by creation of PRC. Furthermore, the Administrator's accountability to the Governing Council for country programmes will be discharged, in part, by means of a covering note by the Administrator transmitting the country programme. These notes will be prepared primarily for the larger programmes and for any of the small programmes which, in the view of the Administrator, have characteristics that warrant being brought to the attention of the Governing Council with a statement of the Administrator's views thereon. It is understood that, in the majority of cases, the Administrator and host Governments would not put forward any programmes on which important disagreement exists; and further discussions would have taken place in an effort to resolve such areas of disagreement as might exist. However, in those cases where full agreement is not reached and the Government wishes nevertheless to submit a programme, the Administrator is constitutionally required to transmit it to the Governing Council. In so doing, however, it is his prerogative and responsibility to make his views known to the Council and he will therefore inform the Council accordingly in his note transmitting the country programme.

II. IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PROJECT IDENTIFICATION, FORMULATION AND APPRAISAL

16. The "quality" measures, announced by the Administrator in his statement to the thirty-second session of the Governing Council, deal primarily with the project development stage of the project cycle, i.e., project identification, selection, formulation and appraisal. These are considered to be the critical and most decisive stages in terms of the eventual success or failure of projects.

A. Project identification

17. Based on the findings of UNDP's internal review of project quality, as well as of earlier reviews conducted by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), the Administrator has decided that stronger efforts must be made to ensure a rigorous and systematic approach to the identification and selection of projects to be financed by UNDP. Decisions made at this stage, unsupported by solid groundwork and analysis, are bound to affect adversely the outcome of projects, resulting in implementation problems that can be resolved only at high costs in time and money.

18. The Administrator has also decided that a clearer definition of responsibility should be given in UNDP policy directives concerning project identification and selection. Identification of approaches and solutions to particular development problems, for which a Government is seeking technical

assistance, should be a shared responsibility of the host Government and of UNDP as the financing institution concerned. Similarly, the subsequent selection process (i.e., decision to drop, defer or proceed with the project proposal) should also be a joint undertaking of the Government and the financing institution. This definition will be reflected in revised policy directives to be issued following consideration by the Administrator of other proposals being prepared at the time of writing for strengthening the project development process.

19. The emphasis on a more active role for UNDP in project identification requires a reinforcement of UNDP's technical capability. An important step in this direction is the creation of the Project Development Facility (see chapter II.E below), which will inter alia finance project identification missions, under UNDP leadership, to assist Governments in conducting a rigorous examination of development problems in the priority sectors of country programmes. These identification missions can take place during the programming exercise and/or as part of the continuing programming process. The aim is to conduct a thorough analysis and diagnosis of development problems to be tackled with UNDP assistance, with emphasis placed on developing various options for the solution of given problems. In this way, a sound basis for decision-making by the Government and UNDP is established, permitting the selection of the most appropriate and cost-effective approach.

20. Other steps have also been taken to deal with this critical part of the project cycle. The new country programming guidelines (see chapter I.A above) provide for an assessment of technical co-operation requirements which will lay the basis for a more objective identification of projects, ensuring that they are related to the objectives and priorities of the country programme.

21. The new format of the country programme document also provides for a clearer enunciation of the various "objectives" of the programme and the projects linked to those objectives. Ongoing projects not linked to such objectives are to be listed separately for special scrutiny and the same will apply fortiori to any newly identified projects.

B. Project preparation

22. Responsibility for project preparation is not defined in the Consensus. The UNDP Policies and Procedures Manual states that it is the responsibility of the Government, while the executing agency and resident representative are to be associated with the process. In actual practice, projects to be financed by UNDP are mainly prepared by the executing agencies which not only have the technical resources and experience for such a task but also have an interest in seeing that activities which come on stream bear a relationship to their field of specialization.

23. The Administrator has decided that UNDP policy directives should give a more clear-cut definition of responsibility for project preparation. This will be done in conjunction with revision of the UNDP Policies and Procedures

Manual (see chapter III.A). Overall responsibility should rest with the host Government. Operational responsibility for the technical work related to preparing the project in detail should be clearly attributed to the organization which is to be designated as the executing agent. However, there is an important role to be played by UNDP, and particularly the resident representative. In this connection, the proposals referred to in paragraph 18 above will also cover these and other issues related to project formulation. In the meantime, the newly established project development facility will enable UNDP to participate selectively in project formulation missions.

24. In numerous evaluations and other reports, poor project design has been consistently singled out as the major shortcoming. The criticisms usually cite overambitious or ill-defined objectives and expected outputs; failure to take external factors into account or to include baseline data for measuring and evaluating results; faulty estimates of time, money and human resources needed to achieve objectives; unrealistic assessment of the Government's absorptive capacity and ability to meet its commitments to the project or to sustain it after completion.

25. There are many reasons for these shortcomings. Some are purely technical, others stem from a misunderstanding of the social environment, while still others are the result of insufficient problem-analysis at the identification stage. Development projects are complex undertakings and utmost care must be taken in developing a methodology for project formulation and design. This, however, presupposes not only that such a methodology exists but, also, that it is applied effectively.

26. While certain improvements can always be introduced, the existing design methodology used by UNDP is considered to be of the standard that is customary in most development assistance agencies. Therefore, attention has been directed less toward improvement of the methodology but rather towards improving its application. One of the steps taken in this regard is that, effective 1 January 1986, all project documents are to be supplemented by a completed checklist and by a design matrix. The purpose is to ensure that all basic design factors have been taken into account and to provide a better basis for UNDP's appraisal of the project.

27. In the past, wide use has been made in UNDP of preparatory assistance specifically for project formulation. In order to assess the experience gained, the Central Evaluation Office will undertake during 1986 an evaluation of the use of the preparatory assistance mechanism.

28. Even with the best of preparation, it must be recognized that there is no guarantee that a development project will work out as intended. An element of risk will always be there, making it all the more imperative to monitor project activities systematically throughout the implementation phase.

C. Project appraisal

29. Project appraisal is the responsibility of UNDP. This is the one area where responsibility is clear, undivided and unambiguously defined in the Consensus. Hence, it has been possible to act directly and with relative speed to introduce measures to improve the appraisal process.

30. Initial project appraisal takes place in the field, and in some of the larger field offices, Project Appraisal Committees have been set up. The Project Development Facility will also be available, on a selective basis, to assist resident representatives in the appraisal of technically complex projects. In order to enhance this process, Project Appraisal Committees (PACs) have now been set up at UNDP headquarters in each of the regional bureaux, working on the basis of standard terms of reference. Their function is to advise the Administrator who has the authority (a) to ensure compliance with policy and procedural directives setting quality standards; and (b) to request modifications or reject projects.

D. Project implementation and monitoring

31. Host Governments and executing agencies share responsibility for project implementation. The steps now taken by UNDP to improve the quality of work in the early phases of the project cycle must be matched by concrete actions by both Governments and executing agencies to improve the quality and pace of project implementation which is often hampered by inordinate delays. The Council's decision endorsing the "quality" measures specifically urges Governments and agencies to make every effort to streamline internal procedures and institutional measures in order to ensure speedy and effective implementation of UNDP-financed projects.

32. Experience, as well as the findings of project evaluation studies, indicate the persistence of problems related to the quality of project inputs provided by host Governments, as well as to the rate of input delivery. Some of these problems can be forestalled or minimized by more careful work at the project identification and project preparation stages, ensuring a realistic assessment of the Government's capacity to deliver project inputs at the quality standards and times required. However, once this has been done and the project is approved by UNDP for implementation, the host Government has the responsibility of ensuring that timely decisions and actions are taken to provide national inputs. Among the areas requiring corrective action by host Governments are (a) timely and adequate budgetary provision covering the counterpart contribution, not only during project implementation but also after UNDP assistance is phased out; (b) review and timely clearance of international project personnel; (c) selection of counterpart personnel and fellowship candidates in accordance with the specified standards and timing; and (d) timely implementation of recommendations arising from project tripartite review meetings.

33. The executing agencies are being urged by the Administrator to improve their financial management practices, insofar as UNDP-assisted projects are concerned, particularly as regards project expenditure forecasting and budget control. The agencies are also being requested to review the quality of the technical backstopping and administrative support provided by agency headquarters to UNDP-assisted projects.

34. For its part, as indicated in chapter III.B, UNDP is improving project monitoring systems to ensure that timely and effective follow-up action is taken by UNDP headquarters and field offices as appropriate.

E. Project Development Facility

35. The Administrator's proposal to establish the Project Development Facility (PDF), was endorsed by the Governing Council in its decision 85/4, which authorized the Administrator to finance PDF operations from Special Programme Resources up to a maximum of \$1 million, for an initial period extending to the end of the third programming cycle.

36. It is the Administrator's intention that PDF be used on a selective basis, as a means of reinforcing UNDP's technical capability so that it may be in a better position to play a more active role in project development, as described in the preceding sections of this report.

37. PDF will finance project identification and project preparation missions in the case of complex or innovative projects, especially those which pose difficult technical issues. In the case of project appraisal, PDF is primarily intended to assist resident representatives in examining projects which lie within their approval authority. PDF missions for project identification and preparation will be undertaken at the request of the Government concerned; appraisal missions will be undertaken with the concurrence of the Government.

38. The composition of PDF-financed missions will be as follows:

(a) Project identification. Specialized consultants recruited by UNDP, and/or UNDP technical staff. In certain cases, UNDP may invite a specialized agency to participate. All project identification missions will be under UNDP leadership;

(b) Project formulation. Agency technical staff or specialized consultants recruited by the executing agency concerned. In some cases, UNDP may decide to be represented on the mission by a specialized consultant or a UNDP technical staff member. Normally, the agency concerned will lead project formulation missions;

(c) Project appraisal. Specialized consultants recruited by UNDP and/or UNDP technical staff.

39. While PDF will make it possible to reinforce UNDP's technical capability to some extent and thereby exert a seminal influence on certain aspects of the project development process, it must be recognized that this influence will be limited, at least initially, to a very small fraction of the projects that are processed annually - approximately 50 out of an average of 1,000-1,500 projects per annum. Furthermore, PDF's initial mandate extends only to 31 December 1986. However, the Administrator will recommend its continuation, if an evaluation of the experience and results obtained so warrant.

III. OTHER MEASURES

A. General revision and simplification of policies and procedures

40. One of the main findings of the internal reviews of programme/project quality was the need for a thorough overhaul of the system which was set up in 1975 for issuing policy and procedural directives and which had become outdated. The present system centres around the Policies and Procedures Manual (PPM) which was designed to be a comprehensive manual covering basic information about UNDP, its mandate, organization and management, programme policies and procedures, general administration, finance, and other related matters. This omnibus manual was to be supplemented by functional handbooks (such as the resident representatives' handbook, auditors' handbook, secretaries' handbook, etc.) and technical guidelines such as country programming guidelines, technical advisory notes, etc.

41. This system has been found to be too complex. Several functional handbooks were never completed; PPM itself is unwieldy and available only in English. A new system is now being developed which will consist of separate policy and procedural manuals dealing with specific areas of UNDP activities. Manuals in areas of management and administration have already been issued, i.e., Personnel Manual, Organizational Handbook, Financial Manual, and General Administration Manual.

42. Work has now begun on a separate manual dealing with instructions and guidelines on programme and project matters. This manual, together with the other manuals already issued, will replace the existing PPM. The new manual will include the recently developed procedures for monitoring, reporting and evaluation, which will also be issued as a separate handbook. It is expected that the Programme and Projects Manual will be completed during 1987 and issued in all working languages.

43. Concomitant with the preparation of this new manual, the overall system for issuing instructions through circulars to headquarters staff, to the field and to agencies is being rationalized to ensure not only that instructions are put out in an effective manner, but that they are immediately reflected in the relevant manuals which, in this way, will be kept up to date at all times.

B. Improvement of management information systems relating to programme activities

44. The need to improve UNDP's management information systems, particularly for field offices, was stressed by resident representatives at the 1985 Global Meeting. In response to these concerns, a computerized system for budget control and management by field offices is now being developed. In addition, the desirability of providing field offices with the means to set up programme reference units and computerized systems of substantive project data, so as to build up a country-level institutional memory of past performance and experience is under consideration. Eighty-six field offices have already been provided with small computers and it is planned to increase the number to a total of 106 field offices by the end of 1986.

45. UNDP's present Programme and Project Management Information System (PPMS) is a computerized information system designed primarily to provide financial data, basic project information, data on reporting as well as country programme management. It is now proposed to broaden the system in order to monitor more closely the thousands of projects currently in operation. Qualitative judgements will be introduced into the data base, drawn from progress, evaluation and similar reports. These qualitative indicators, together with the quantitative data already in PPMS, will greatly improve the effectiveness of existing monitoring systems in the field and at UNDP headquarters.

46. A task force is currently reviewing the management reporting system as it relates to qualitative aspects of programme activities. In developing its proposals, the task force will take into account the work-load factor in field offices, as well as ways and means of improving the use of existing information flows, as indicated above.

47. Action will also be taken through the existing systems of co-ordination and consultation within UNDP and between UNDP and other elements of the United Nations system to rationalize and thus, as much as possible, reduce the information-gathering and reporting burden on the limited staff resources in field offices.

C. Staff resources and training

48. In instituting the "quality" measures, the Administrator has been very much aware of their impact on programme staff at all levels, both in the field and at headquarters, and not only in terms of work-load implications but also in terms of changing work habits and attitudes. This is particularly important in the case of supervisory staff who are responsible not only for ensuring compliance with established policies and procedures, but also for alerting the appropriate officials when adjustments or revisions need to be made in operational policies and procedures in the light of experience.

49. The Administrator is also acutely aware of the need to equip UNDP field offices with the requisite number of experienced and qualified staff necessary to enable the resident representatives to exercise their role. Following the issuance of the Joint Inspection Unit report on UNDP field offices 1/ which noted inter alia that "field offices, in the majority of cases, are unable to give adequate attention to the quality of programmes because of their extensive work-load which is heavily administrative...", a concerted effort has been made - and continues to be made - to ensure that field offices are strengthened, particularly those in Africa where the co-ordinating role of resident representatives, and hence their work-load, have assumed even greater importance in the wake of the crisis engendered by the drought. In this connection, action was taken early in 1985 to reassign the most experienced resident representatives and administrative personnel to the emergency countries to deal with the influx of United Nations and other external assistance. The number of Junior Professional Officers in these countries was also substantially increased during 1985 and the most promising officers were assigned to the emergency countries, over and above the normal quotas.

50. Besides redeployment of staff, attention has been focused on training as a major factor in improving performance. As part of the integrated managerial strategy described in this report, the Training Section conducted an assessment of in-service training courses in programming techniques, as well as managerial and administrative skills related to programming and project development. Based on this assessment, the Training Section has redesigned certain courses and developed new material related to the new programming guidelines and to the revised instructions concerning the project document format.

51. In addition, ways and means are also being sought to increase the participation of host Government and agency field staff in UNDP training courses. Local seminars run by resident representatives, and supported by the the Training Section both financially and substantively under the Field Office Training Plan, are one means of increasing such training in the field. For example, five workshops on project design, monitoring and evaluation will be conducted by the Central Evaluation Office/Bureau for Programme Policy and Evaluation and the Training Section for deputy resident representatives who have been designated as evaluation co-ordinators in field offices. This pilot effort already seems to have some impact on programme and project quality, and will be progressively integrated into all regular programme courses.

IV. COLLABORATION WITH THE EXECUTING AGENCIES IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

52. The new guidelines for country programming discussed above re-emphasize the importance of close collaboration with the agencies in the preparation of country programmes. Resident representatives are specifically instructed to indicate to the Government how the expertise of the United Nations organizations might be brought to bear on specific studies and reviews during the programming process. Further, regardless of whether the Government decides to invite direct agency participation in the country programming

exercise, the resident representative is to consult with the agencies on the proposed content of the country programme and, once it is finalized, to invite them to utilize the country programme as a frame of reference for their operational activities, as envisaged in General Assembly resolutions 32/197 and 34/213 on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations. As part and parcel of this approach, the ongoing and planned activities financed in each country from the regular and special funds of agencies are specifically to be reviewed at an early stage of the process, with a view to including them, where appropriate, into the resources of the country programme. The new programming guidelines were discussed with the agencies at a recent CCSQ(OPS) meeting where they welcomed the envisaged participation in the country programming process.

53. As part of UNDP's current efforts to improve project quality, as well as project delivery, the Administrator has decided to reintroduce annual agency review meetings. Such meetings will review major operational problems identified by both parties as well as the project pipeline. At the recent Inter-agency Consultative Meeting, agency representatives welcomed the resumption of these operational review meetings. UNDP is currently exploring with the agencies the modalities for these meetings.

54. Operations financed under PDF referred to above (see chapter II.E) will benefit greatly from close collaboration with the agencies. Clearly it is in the interest of project quality and of those responsible for implementing projects to scrutinize available options when highly complex solutions must be found. It is therefore envisaged that agencies should participate in missions financed by PDF, and that they could, in appropriate cases, act as lead agency in organizing formulation missions.

55. With regard to project delivery and the quality of technical and administrative backstopping, close collaboration with executing agencies and Governments is especially important. The current concerns in this area have been raised by the Administrator in various inter-agency forums and it is hoped that the ongoing discussions about the organization of project work, both in the field and at headquarters, will lead to tangible improvements in the near future. The successful inter-agency collaboration aiming at a joint reporting, monitoring and evaluation system has been very encouraging and it has allowed the United Nations system to enter into an intensive dialogue about utilizing - through better feedback mechanisms and enhanced training - the results of evaluations to improve the quality of programmes and projects.

Notes

1/ JIU/REP/83/4.