POLICY REVIEW: THE ROLE OF AND NEED FOR IN-HOUSE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE IN THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, INCLUDING THE ROLE OF THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY DIVISION

SUMMARY

This report is presented to the Governing Council in response to decision 88/16 of 1 July 1988 and is compatible with UNDP strategic planning for the 1990s and beyond.

Its purpose is to examine the role of and need for UNDP in-house technical expertise in maximizing the ability of the United Nations system to respond to Governments' development priorities. The report first reviews the technical functions performed by UNDP in fulfilling its role in the tripartite relationship with Governments and the specialized agencies. Second, the profile of UNDP technical expertise which would be best suited to perform these functions effectively is described. Third, the constraints presently facing UNDP in achieving this profile are explained. Finally, suggestions are made on how to alleviate these constraints, also indicating the resulting enhancements which would effectively maintain and improve the quality, delivery and relevance of the programmes and other services which UNDP, together with the specialized agencies, provides in response to developing country needs.
I. INTRODUCTION

1. This report is presented to the Governing Council in response to decision 88/16 and is compatible with UNDP strategic planning for the 1990s and beyond. In this latter context, the report is complementary to the Administrator's report to the Governing Council on UNDP and future world development.

2. UNDP must be able to draw on technical expertise, at both the field level and at headquarters, which is of sufficient strength and of the highest quality. Such expertise allows UNDP to provide objective service and advice to Governments in the selection of priorities and of technical options for development co-operation efforts in support of their development objectives. It also allows UNDP to maintain its creativity to support the constantly evolving needs of developing countries for meeting increasingly sophisticated technical and managerial development challenges.

3. The acknowledged, extensive technical capacities of the specialized agencies of the United Nations system are available to Governments to draw on for meeting any of their technical expertise requirements. Given this availability, how does UNDP in-house technical expertise facilitate Government access to these agencies? How does UNDP technical expertise differ from and complement that of the specialized agencies? Finally, what are the constraints facing UNDP in the performance of its technical functions, and how could an expanded capacity and a more balanced technical profile for UNDP further enhance the relevance of the United Nations system to the needs of developing countries?

4. The role of and need for UNDP in-house technical expertise has been raised with the Council members on two separate occasions over the last year. The first was in the context of the eighth session of the Working Group of the Committee of the Whole which, as one of the two substantive items on the agenda, discussed the subject of project design, formulation and approval. In this forum, the technical aspect of project design and appraisal, and the field office and the role of the Technical Advisory Division in these processes, were covered in some detail. The second occasion was in the context of the Administrator's report on UNDP and future world development. This report advances a general case for increasing the technical capacity of UNDP in several key areas so as to be in a position for the United Nations system as a whole to better respond to developing country needs.

5. The purpose of the present report, therefore, is to examine the role of and need for UNDP in-house technical expertise in maximizing the ability of the United Nations system to respond to Governments' development priorities. The report first reviews the technical functions performed by UNDP in fulfilling its role in the tripartite relationship with Governments and the specialized agencies. Second, the profile of UNDP technical expertise which would be best suited to perform these functions effectively is described. Third, the constraints presently facing UNDP in achieving this profile are explained. Finally, suggestions are made on how to alleviate these constraints, also indicating the resulting enhancements which would effectively maintain and improve the quality, delivery and relevance of the programmes and other services which UNDP, together with the specialized agencies, provides in response to developing country needs.
6. In examining the technical expertise issue, the report will primarily deal with expertise in UNDP core operational units, namely, the UNDP Regional Bureaux (with emphasis on the field offices), and the Bureau for Programme Policy and Evaluation (BPPE), with emphasis on the Technical Advisory Division.

II. THE TECHNICAL FUNCTIONS PERFORMED BY UNDP'S CORE OPERATIONAL UNITS

7. In describing the technical functions performed by the UNDP core operational units, certain basic principles contained in the Consensus prescribe the respective roles of technical capacities within the specialized agencies and within UNDP in support of United Nations system technical co-operation activities with developing countries. These principles have been re-emphasized in various subsequent General Assembly resolutions concerning United Nations system operational activities for development, the latest of which is resolution 43/199 of 20 December 1988. In brief, the specialized agencies are expected to possess the widest range of technical specialization. They exist as global centres of excellence, available to respond to the increasingly specialized technical requirements of developing countries. One of the technical roles of UNDP is to provide an integrating, multisectoral dimension, so that Governments can view the United Nations system technical co-operation efforts from a comprehensive, holistic perspective, and be able to obtain advice on choosing among options available to them for the most effective use of resources. UNDP is also expected to provide a first-level technical examination for project identification, formulation, monitoring and review of UNDP-supported projects and programmes and to act as the broker for linking the requirements with the best sources of specialized expertise. Finally, just like any financial institution which is accountable to its governing body, UNDP must be able to satisfy itself, using in-house independent analysis, as to the technical soundness of its programmes and projects. In each of the following functions, at least one or more of these three principal roles are brought out.

8. Programming of UNDP assistance. It is the Government, in consultation with UNDP, which determines the development priorities which UNDP will be called on to support. In the context of this consultation, the UNDP Resident Representative should have access to both sectoral expertise from the specialized agencies, as well as multisectoral technical expertise to advise Governments, where necessary, in the integrated programming of technical co-operation activities. This would help to ensure the correct identification of those national needs which the United Nations system agencies are best able to meet with UNDP financing, taking into account technical assistance available through other donors.

9. Project identification. With the preparation of the overall country programme framework, Governments undertake to identify the projects contained in the UNDP programme. In this identification process, UNDP should be able to advise Governments about which specialized agency would be the most relevant as executing agency for a proposed project, or whether the Government might consider executing the project by itself or in association with the specialized agencies. Finally, even at the identification stage, an earmarking of estimated total project cost, based on input requirements, must be made for programme management purposes.
10. **Project formulation.** A Government may undertake to formulate a UNDP-assisted project itself, or it may request the assistance of a specialized agency. To facilitate this task, the UNDP Resident Representative may be called upon to assist Governments in drawing up terms of reference for a project formulation mission. For a Government formulation team, this might include study tours to investigate situations in other countries relevant to the project, and would call for knowledge of the best, most appropriate examples. For an agency formulation team, this would require a judgement on the type, the number, and the duration of experts needed to complete the task. When the field office or UNDP headquarters lack the in-house expertise or capacity to handle each request, they draw on qualified outside technical specialists (using, for example, the Project Development Facility (PDF)) which they must be able to identify. A UNDP technical input is also helpful in the design stage of the project itself when searching for alternative technical and managerial strategies, to help ensure that the most creative, appropriate and cost-effective options are identified.

11. **Project appraisal.** The UNDP Governing Council holds the Administrator - not the specialized agencies nor the Government - accountable for ensuring the best possible utilization of UNDP resources. As in funding agencies the world over, the Administrator must rely on staff accountable to him for the technical soundness of any project for which he is accountable. Consequently, independent technical expertise is required for project appraisal, which enables the Administrator to discharge his responsibilities as provided for in the Consensus.

12. **Project monitoring/review/evaluation.** This accountability carries over to collaborating with the Government and executing agency in keeping track of project activities, to providing periodic direction if needed, and to finding out whether the intended impact is being achieved. For all of these functions, in-house or independently recruited technical expertise within UNDP is needed.

13. **Programme management.** This function requires management skills within the UNDP field office, but also requires access to sufficient sectoral and multisectoral technical expertise to advise Governments on progress being made towards established programme goals.

14. **Trouble-shooting/problem-solving.** Occasionally, a difficulty may arise in a project which requires a technical assessment from someone not connected with the execution of the project. In such cases, a Government may call on UNDP to intervene with an independent technical judgement, or to provide the opinion of someone with a broader understanding of how a particular technical issue can best be adapted to the development needs of a specific country.

15. **Substantive consultations/links with specialized agencies.** Communication between the agencies of the United Nations system and UNDP is facilitated when there are in UNDP viable technical interlocutors, who also contribute with pertinent information to assist in the search for alternative technical solutions to specific development problems. The constantly changing development environment generates needs for adaptation which UNDP, with its global and multisectoral overview, is in a good position to perceive. Technical expertise within UNDP should enable it to identify where such adaptation is needed.
16. Determining policy directions on developmental issues. UNDP should strive to maintain its relevance to developing countries by continually reviewing and adapting its own operations. Important trends in general developmental issues, or in the modalities of technical co-operation must be detected, researched, analysed and acted upon. Technical expertise should exist within UNDP which would allow for it to perform such a function adequately, including arranging for agency or other outside specialists to carry out the work.

III. THE PROFILE OF UNDP TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

17. The above description of the functions performed by UNDP calls for a certain profile of technical expertise, one which would enable it to perform these functions in a cost-effective manner and complement the technical capacities of the specialized agencies in maximizing the benefits of the United Nations system to developing countries. This profile is a combination of persons having broad knowledge of and experience in a sectoral field, suitably balanced with persons having solid expertise in multisectoral disciplines.

18. Broad sectoral expertise. Several of the above technical functions call for a capability to review and make judgements on basic technical and management issues. This is demonstrated, for example, in the UNDP technical role in project identification, appraisal, or monitoring/review/evaluation, in trouble-shooting, and in maintaining substantive links with specialized agencies. Rather than being the source of specialized knowledge which is already available through specialized agencies or elsewhere, a UNDP technical professional should know who the most appropriate specialists are, and how to access them when needed. He/she should, in brief, ideally be a broad technical specialist, with a grasp of the fundamentals of a particular sector, and long experience in one of its broader aspects, such as line management.

19. Technical officers having a broad knowledge of a sector allow UNDP to deal with its extensive range of technical co-operation programmes and projects using a minimum of technically specialized staff. For certain functions calling for specialized technical advice, UNDP refers the task to the relevant specialized agency. For other functions calling for an independent technical input, outside technical consultants are relied on. Given the increasingly specialized technical requirements of developing countries, when UNDP utilizes its expertise to link requirements with the best sources of expertise it shows a cost-effective utilization of United Nations system technical resources.

20. Solid multisectoral expertise. In addition to a broad sectoral expertise, UNDP should have the technical ability to examine sectoral issues from a broader perspective. Development is a multisectoral process, and UNDP must be able to provide the necessary overview by looking both at interrelations between sectoral issues and at influences of one sector on another. To achieve this, it is necessary for UNDP to have solid expertise in multisectoral disciplines such as human resources development, technology, management, economics, or environment. The need for such a multisectoral capacity was recently reinforced by the General Assembly in paragraph 6 (c) of resolution 43/199, which requested proposals on
"ways and means of achieving the objective of the provision to recipient Governments by the United Nations system at the field level of technical advice in a multisectoral and integrated manner, including the deployment of substantive and technical competence".

21. Programme and project identification and formulation, for example, are functions where a multisectoral perspective within UNDP is important. Economic growth, human development and equity, technology transfer, environment, and management are examples of some of the more critical areas which encompass the main development concerns facing the future. Each of these and similar concerns cuts across traditional sectoral categories. A sectoral programme or project to increase agricultural productivity, to take an example, impacts on a nation's economic situation, promotes food security, requires the introduction of the appropriate technology, could potentially promote erosion or chemical pollution, and calls for well-organized farmer support services and community organization and participation. A similar case could be made for promoting development in most sectors, from road transport to industry to education to water supply and sanitation. Technical expertise within UNDP, therefore, should be geared to maintaining this multisectoral perspective in programme and project identification and formulation, and ensure that UNDP-supported technical co-operation activities accommodate the changing and diverse needs of countries.

22. Similarly, when it comes to project appraisal and evaluation, development problems and viable solutions to solve them are increasingly interdependent. A decision to promote an advanced technology for food processing, for example, should be examined from different perspectives: will the new technology be economically viable? How will it affect the livelihood and employment of persons engaged in the activity at present? Is the technology the most suitable one in the local context? Is it an environmentally sound and sustainable approach? Can the required managerial, human, financial and material resources be provided and sustained? In short, it is inadequate to appraise and evaluate any particular project or programme from only one perspective. UNDP technical expertise should thus be multidisciplinary to be appropriate for such multidimensional assessments.

23. Finally, on another multidimensional plane, projects must be examined from each technical angle not only at the country level – national activities might have economic, social or environmental impacts on other countries as well. Unco-ordinated export incentive strategies could flood the market and result in lower producer prices; urban development activities could result in increased migration; a hydroelectric scheme could lead to coastal erosion. On the other hand, a national reforestation project undertaken as part of the Tropical Forestry Action Plan should be seen as a concrete manifestation of a co-ordinated global effort. Increased promotion of multisectoral global or regional action plans through country-level projects holds tremendous potential, and should be possible through a network of UNDP technical specialists and information management systems in field offices throughout the world and at headquarters.
IV. CONSTRAINTS FACING THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN THE PERFORMANCE OF ITS TECHNICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

24. The above descriptions of UNDP technical expertise is based on a standard required to perform the technical functions expected of UNDP. However, this standard should be seen against the current profile of sectoral and multisectoral expertise which exists within UNDP. Furthermore, even though the nature of UNDP technical expertise requires a minimum of technical staff, the present overall technical capacity is below this minimum, and less than adequate to expeditiously and effectively carry out UNDP technical responsibilities.

25. **Sectoral and multisectoral expertise.** Most UNDP core Professional posts are classified by the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) as "development administrators" and job descriptions generally stress non-technical functions. Staff in the field and at headquarters may possess basic technical knowledge, but this knowledge is not necessarily used or kept current in career development. Nevertheless, UNDP recruitment policies have ensured that virtually all UNDP Professionals possess at least broad technical background in a skill related to development. Among these, economics and public administration have been most prevalent.

26. When one compares the sectoral orientations of UNDP projects with the sectoral and intersectoral skills of UNDP Professional staff in the field and in the Technical Advisory Division, one notes a serious lack of key multisectoral and sectoral backgrounds in areas of substantial UNDP involvement. According to the 1987 UNDP Compendium of approved projects, for example, about 18 per cent of UNDP projects were in the agriculture, livestock and forestry sector. However, only 46 field Professionals (national and international) listed themselves as having skills related to agriculture. This means that a large majority of UNDP field offices have substantial programmes in agriculture yet no one in-house is knowledgeable on the subject. A similar conclusion can be drawn comparing project numbers with staff skills in many other areas - natural resources, health, education, employment - both in the field and at headquarters. Similarly, concerning multisectoral skills, few field offices possess staff with backgrounds in engineering or the environmental sciences for covering projects from technological or environmental perspectives. At headquarters, the most notable shortcoming is the insufficiency or even complete absence in the Technical Advisory Division of some key skills in areas such as trade and finance, mineral resources, and others which are required for covering a large number of projects. An important conclusion which can be drawn from relating this analysis to the need for technical expertise within UNDP, therefore, is that more recognition should be given to the technical contribution required of UNDP in the performance of its responsibilities.

27. **Technical capacity.** Technical capacity requirements in the field and at headquarters can be measured in terms of work-load related to performing the functions described above. Judging from past trends, on average roughly 5,000 projects are expected to be ongoing in a given year during the fourth indicative planning figure (IPF) cycle. Roughly one fifth of this total will be completed over the course of a year and replaced by new ones, while another fifth will be under preparation. Of the number of new projects, about 70 per cent will be small
scale, and approved in the field. To this amount should be added approvals of
small-scale substantive revisions to projects already approved. In considering the
technical work-load of the field offices in this area, it is also important to note
that even though small-scale projects are expected to account for only about
30 per cent of the total IPF resources managed, they can sometimes be as
technically complicated as large-scale ones. Therefore, the number of projects
processed by the field offices is a more relevant indicator of technical work-load
requirements than the dollar amount. From the point of view of the functions
described above, then, it can be said that the technical responsibilities of the
field offices are considerable, particularly when one considers that (a) as much as
70 per cent of UNDP projects are appraised and approved in the field with no formal
technical input from headquarters (although there is often informal consultations
when appropriate); (b) all UNDP-supported projects involve the field office in
their identification, formulation, monitoring and review; (c) all field offices
play an important role in programming and programme management; and (d) the need
for a technical capacity within the field offices for non-IPF activities is
expected to increase.

28. Large-scale, complex, and certain other selected projects and project
revisions from the core programme are referred to the Regional Bureaux at
headquarters for more in-depth appraisal. Projects from the special funds such as
the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) and the United Nations
Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), and others are also presented to the Action
Committee for approval. Necessary technical support, required either by the
Regional Bureaux, by Action Committee representatives, or by field offices for the
functions mentioned above, is provided by the Technical Advisory Division.

29. The technical responsibilities of the Technical Advisory Division are
considerable. In 1989, the 12 staff members of the Division are expected to:

(a) Carry out about 1,000 technical appraisals and reappraisals on about 250
new projects as well as 200 substantive revisions. A project proposal/project
revision can be referred to the Division at the project formulation framework
stage, and at the draft project document stage. In addition, the Division is
required to participate in all the Project Appraisal Committee meetings, and to
prepare briefs for and be represented at the Action Committee;

(b) Review and comment on about 500 project evaluations, terminal reports,
and progress/tripartite review reports;

(c) Participate in about 15 field missions for sectoral and country programme
reviews;

(d) Participate in about 80 problem-solving missions, i.e., in-depth project
reviews or key tripartite reviews;

(e) Participate in about 15 project evaluations or thematic evaluations;

(f) Review terms of reference and arrange for consultants for missions or
desk work which might be required by the Regional Bureaux for programme/project
identification, formulation, review, evaluation, or any other type of task requiring an independent technical specialist; brief and debrief these consultants;

(g) Promote and co-ordinate new technical programme initiatives, such as environment and sustainable development in response to Governing Council decision 88/57 of 1 July 1988, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, and other new initiatives;

(h) Maintain linkages with specialized agencies and outside technical specialists, including sources of potential consultants;

(i) Represent UNDP at technical meetings and professional associations;

(j) Provide substantive contributions to policy and programme documents, including Programme Advisory Notes, background papers for dialogues with specialized agencies, and ad hoc assignments which may be needed.

30. Concerning the capacity of the Technical Advisory Division, the most salient issue is the extremely heavy work-load of the staff: an in-depth project appraisal, for example, averages two person-days. The Division has been able to accommodate the work-load to some extent through the use of external consultants to perform, under its guidance and supervision, some of the review and appraisal functions. This arrangement, however, further strains the work-loads of the core staff. To compensate for the inadequate capacity of the Division, the Regional Bureaux have increasingly been resorting to outside technical specialists where possible. The above work-load estimates, however, have already taken these actions into account. Much of it consists of core responsibilities which cannot be delegated.

V. RESPONDING TO UNDP'S TECHNICAL EXPERTISE REQUIREMENTS

31. The above analysis reveals several areas where modest interventions would significantly improve UNDP technical expertise, both at the field level and at headquarters. At the field level, proposals have been put forward in the Administrator's 1990-1991 biennial budget submission relating to the enhancement of field offices with development support officers and increasing national Professional staff, combined with a diversification of the skills of existing staff. Incorporated into these proposals is the establishment of a field office technical expertise profile which is appropriately balanced and suited to the programme thrusts of the country.

32. In the light of the pressing need to increase its capacity at headquarters, the Technical Advisory Division has examined and will continue to examine its requirements for increased staff in the appropriate disciplines (particularly in areas such as environment, trade and finance, and others which are especially weak) on the basis of detailed work-load calculations. To this end, budget proposals for the 1990-1991 biennium are being submitted for an initial minimal increase of three Professional staff members, as the first step in a longer-term plan for strengthening the capacity of the Division. Details of this proposal can be found in the budget estimates for 1990-1991 (DP/1989/55).
33. Concurrent with increasing the core staff of the Division, existing sectoral and multisectoral technical expertise available both within and outside BPPE - including the special units - will also be inventoried and drawn on as appropriate. This will ensure that maximum use is obtained from existing resources to meet requirements in the most cost-effective manner. The Division will call upon qualified staff from other units, subject to their own work-load requirements, to provide technical appraisals or other services, as in the case of outside consultants. Even at the field level, such an inventory would allow technically qualified UNDP Professionals serving in one field office to be sent on short-term missions to other nearby countries needing advice in their area of expertise.

34. In addition to in-house capacities, UNDP will be meeting the growing demand for increasingly specialized high standard professional advice in all technical fields by systematically broadening its outside professional networks. At the international level, officers of the Division, beyond establishing closer linkages with the specialized agencies for accessing expertise available through them, will expand contacts with independent top-level specialists and consulting firms. At the local level, consultancy rosters will include expertise available through local firms, universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

35. The enhancements described in the preceding section are concerned with more effective ways of utilizing UNDP in-house technical expertise to obtain the maximum impact from the United Nations system for beneficiary Governments. These enhancements are essentially three: (a) increased emphasis on the technical dimension in field-office staffing profiles; (b) increased technical capacity in the field and in the Technical Advisory Division; and (c) increased use of technical expertise existing elsewhere both within UNDP and outside. With these enhancements, Governments will be able to access more effectively the technical expertise available throughout the United Nations system, and apply it more effectively to achieve their development goals. The following, for example, would be some advantages:

(a) Improved delivery of high-quality projects could be achieved through an increase of Technical Advisory Division staff capacity to carry out appraisals, combined with a reduction in the appraisal time needed by the Division, thanks to better quality technical appraisals of projects in the field;

(b) More systematic, integrated appraisals of projects by persons having different sectoral and multisectoral perspectives could be achieved with an increased availability of field and headquarters staff having appropriately suited technical expertise profiles;

(c) Increased attention could be paid to high priority but less immediate technical responsibilities, such as improving substantive consultations with specialized agencies, policy research and macro-economic analysis, and the development of creative, forward-looking, new directions for UNDP and its agency partners;
(d) Technical professionals in the field, at headquarters and from specialized agencies could periodically be brought together to share experiences and identify problems or approaches which could then be pursued either in-house, with the relevant specialized agencies, or through consultants. Similarly, periodic sessions with leading experts could be carried out in a particular priority field of interest for the purpose of informing senior UNDP management and key staff, as well as agency representatives, on the state of the art, and to identify areas where UNDP or the agencies might follow up. Field staff could share this global base of knowledge with their Government counterparts and other local professionals through in-country seminars.

36. In reviewing UNDP technical expertise requirements, it should be noted that the basic characteristics of this technical expertise will continue to be broad sectoral knowledge combined with solid multisectoral specialists, which are complementary to the specific technical capacity of the specialized agencies. This will facilitate enhanced collaboration among the agencies and between them, the Governments and UNDP. A more cost-effective UNDP contribution to the operational activities for development of the United Nations system will result. It is, as can be seen, the foundation for programme and project quality, cost-effective service, accountability and creativity.