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SUPPORT

PROGRAMME PLANNING

Evaluation of the mid-term review process

Note by the Administrator

SUMMARY

This note contains the response of the Administrator to the evaluation reports requested by the Governing Council in its decision 88/17 of 1 July 1988, which invited the Administrator to undertake, through the Central Evaluation Office, an evaluation of the country programme mid-term review process. The note summarizes the principal findings and recommendations of the evaluation. The full evaluation report is being distributed for information.

The Administrator agrees that the findings of the evaluation are useful for moving from a learning experience, which has characterized the first two years of the process, to a more systematic, thorough programme approach to the country programming process.

I. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

1. The concept of a mid-term review has existed as part of the country programming process since 1971, and reviews have been carried out since then in many countries. The intensity and frequency of the review process has varied with the size of the programme and the circumstances of the country concerned.
2. The mid-term review process received increased attention as part of the Council's deliberations in 1985 on programme and project quality. Concern was expressed that projects scheduled to be implemented towards the end of a country programme had been identified five to seven years earlier and there was a possibility that they would no longer be relevant when the time came to implement them. Concerns were also expressed about the degree of flexibility and precision of programmes, uncertainties in the resource situation and a lack of continuity in the policy dialogue. This led to more formal instructions being established on the content and timing of mid-term reviews, which were provided to field offices following Governing Council decision 88/17 of 1 July 1988.
3. The terms of reference of the evaluation were designed to address the concerns expressed by the Governing Council as well as issues that had emerged from the internal monitoring of the process carried out by UNDP. A two-person team analysed the 28 mid-term review reports that had been received by the time of the evaluation, i.e., September-November 1989. The evaluators then visited six countries that had already completed mid-term reviews and where opportunities existed to observe follow-up activities in relation to the review. The views of all field offices and agencies were sought and visits were made to the headquarters of five executing agencies. The evaluators prepared preliminary observations on the mid-term review in each country that they visited and discussed them with each field office prior to the mission's departure from the country concerned. These observations were also discussed with operational units at UNDP headquarters on the mission's return and prior to the preparation of their report. Finally, the report benefited from extensive consultations with the regional bureaux.

II. INITIAL FINDINGS

4. The evaluation of this first set of mid-term reviews identified some initial findings and recommendations that are available to guide the conduct of the remaining mid-term reviews to be carried out during the rest of the fourth programming cycle. It concluded that:
 - (a) Mid-term reviews had improved the quality of programmes but that much of the improvement had been at the level of programme management. The review process now needed to focus on enhancing programme effectiveness;
 - (b) The mid-term review process offered considerable scope for improving the enduring impact of the work of UNDP, in particular when the review process was seen as one of several tools for assuring programme quality, the others being the country programme assessments and the appraisal of new country programmes;

(c) Specific advantages gained by some countries from the mid-term review process included sharpened relevance of the country programme; timely adjustment of its thrust; a strengthening of its focus in the pursuit of key objectives; the promise of enhanced project impact; better potential for programme delivery; intensified staff development; preparatory steps towards the development of the next country programme. Where these advantages had been secured, the exercise had been cost-effective;

(d) The additional work which mid-term reviews had imposed was significant but still quite small in comparison to the benefits gained in the field. A significant additional burden had also fallen on limited headquarters resources needed to backstop the process;

(e) The mid-term review process had not yet functioned adequately as a means of planning programme changes, partly because it normally came at a time when three quarters of the programme had already been committed;

(f) Overview papers prepared by UNDP headquarters for the Governing Council would benefit from being more substantive and comprehensive, pointing to the generic lessons of the mid-term plan exercises. To be done properly, this task would require the deployment of some additional qualified manpower within UNDP headquarters;

(g) The guidelines for mid-term reviews contained in document DP/1988/19/Add.3 contained inconsistencies and needed to be redrawn. Equally, headquarters instructions for the preparation of mid-term reviews needed to be further clarified and UNDP quality control of the process to be made more demanding.

5. The evaluators urged that the constituent parts of a good medium-term review be clearly spelled out and suggested that the following 10 essential elements be covered in the review:

(a) The process of preparing country programmes and mid-term reviews should fully involve the Governments concerned. In cases where Government participation has been most significant, the results of the mid-term review exercise have been perceived to be more meaningful;

(b) Mid-term reviews should be a managed process, responsive to the requirements of the Governments, requiring orderly preparation, systematic follow-up and timely distribution of the results;

(c) Mid-term reviews should be timely, substantive and balanced. They must deal with operational issues, but also with broader national programme considerations. Where appropriate, the review of the country programme should be linked to larger exercises such as round-table meetings, Consultative Groups, and national technical co-operation assessments and programmes (NaTCAPs);

(d) Mid-term reviews should be selective in their coverage of priority issues. These priority areas should be identified beforehand, perhaps in a mid-term review issues paper prepared jointly by the recipient Government and the field office;

(e) Mid-term reviews should involve a solid analysis of the country's development situation. It is the evolution of the latter which determines the appropriateness, or the continued relevance, of the country programme. This requires that field offices should have the capacity to analyse and interpret development issues;

(f) The participation of the specialized agencies and of other donors can increase the impact of the mid-term review on the overall supply and utilization of technical co-operation;

(g) Mid-term review meetings should include discussion of sectoral and thematic issues and their relevance to the country programme, sectoral ministries and specialized agencies concerned with these issues should participate in the meetings;

(h) Mid-term review reports should concentrate on programme relevance, evaluate likely programme impact, discuss relevant global concerns such as women in development or sustainable development, ascertain whether the programme concerned continued to be on track and discuss execution modalities. They should be modest and candid. They should present both positive and negative lessons of experience to facilitate learning and to ensure cross-fertilization. They should signal the scope for application of mid-term review results to the programming of resources under the fourth programming cycle;

(i) Mid-term review reports should be explicit and precise concerning changes in country programme themes, objectives, project lists, and lists of projects added and deleted. Any projects added via the review should be linked explicitly to relevant national programme objectives and themes;

(j) Mid-term review reports should be produced in a timely fashion and be widely disseminated both within the Government and within the donor community. They should be accompanied by a substantive mid-term review summary. The subsequent overview paper prepared at UNDP headquarters should contain recommendations concerning those issues requiring the attention of senior management and the Council.

6. The evaluation also suggested that technical co-operation was a development modality with a leverage that far exceeded the amount of resources devoted to it and was evolving as the needs of developing countries diversified and evolved. Part of the evolution required on the part of UNDP involved a shift from an organization with a project culture to one which was equally proficient at handling programme issues. This in turn required that UNDP be able to analyse and learn the lessons of experience of the programme and feed them back into operations. The mid-term review has been and continues to be an appropriate device to achieve these ends.

7. A corollary of the transition mentioned above was that some movement was needed away from purely delivery issues - which are also necessary - to a greater emphasis on the quality of the contribution made to the development issues addressed by the Programme.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

8. The evaluation identified a number of areas for possible follow-up by UNDP management. These include, with respect to the mid-term review process:

- (a) Review of plans for completion of the outstanding mid-term reviews;
- (b) Strengthening the secretariat of the Programme Review Committee;
- (c) Guidance to the field, based on the lessons of experience concerning: management of the mid-term review process; preparation of an issues paper prior to launching a mid-term review exercise and an analytical summary following the exercise; involvement of specialized agencies and donors; clarification of the existing guidelines for mid-term reviews; dissemination of the results of the review within government and the donor community.

9. The evaluation has also suggested some measures which could lead to better preparation of country programmes:

- (a) Preparation by the Government, with UNDP assistance where needed, of a technical co-operation needs assessment, as a prelude to each country programme;
- (b) Greater rigour in the analysis of the supply and utilization of technical co-operation resources;
- (c) Modification of current arrangements for mobilizing the inputs from the specialized agencies of the United Nations system to take due account of the enhanced role of government in programme formulation and implementation.

10. The Administrator welcomes the rigorous but constructive comments and suggestions contained in the evaluation. The preliminary nature of many of the findings about a new process such as the mid-term review should be noted. Equally, the remarks in the report concerning the weaknesses in many country programmes need to be viewed in the context of a clear improvement that has been associated with technical assistance programming based on technical assistance needs assessment exercises such as the NaTCAPs, a point that the evaluation itself recognizes in its suggestions for improved country programming.

11. The Administrator concurs with the observation that the guidelines for mid-term reviews need to be improved and is developing revised ones.

12. UNDP welcomes the attempt to define the essential elements that all mid-term reviews should contain as well as the specific suggestions put forward in the evaluation. Regarding the other mid-term reviews remaining to be carried during the balance of the cycle, the Administrator has requested very careful planning and management of these exercises by field offices in close consultation with Governments and, if requested by the Government concerned, with agency partners.

13. The suggestion for strengthening the secretariat of the Programme Review Committee will have to be viewed in the context of the decentralization of activities and the redeployment of staff and functions that have been separately recommended to the Council.

14. Regarding guidance to the field, a brief summary of this evaluation as well as the report itself has already been circulated to the field offices.
