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## APPROVAL OF ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME, IN THE LIGHT, INTER ALIA, OF THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUND PROGRAMME

### Note by the Executive Director

During the period since the first session of the Governing Council the Executive Director has undertaken, with the co-operation of Governments and of bodies in the United Nations system, a number of activities connected with the International Referral System. The design of the system has been influenced by consultations among experts from both developed and developing countries. In addition there has been an improvement of the thesaurus, central file, and certain technical aspects of the system.

In order to assist the Executive Director to assess the state of development of the system at this time, a meeting of experts serving in their individual capacity but nominated by Governments was held from 4 to 6 March 1974, immediately before the second session of the Governing Council. These experts were joined in their deliberations by several experts from United Nations agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental

organizations. This group discussed the status and possible future of the IRS in its various aspects, taking into consideration the results of previous expert group meetings and discussions. On the basis of their discussions the experts prepared a report to the Executive Director of their views on the status of the IRS and the lines along which it should be developed further.

The Executive Director, having carefully examined this report and its recommendations, finds that it accords with and reflects his views ..... with regard to the IRS. Accordingly, he transmits the attached report of the meeting of experts as expressing his recommendations on the IRS.

The Governing Council may wish to decide that the report could constitute suitable guidance to the Executive Director for the establishment and further development of the IRS.

Report on the International  
Referral System for Sources  
of Environmental Information

I. GENERAL BACKGROUND

1. The International Referral System for Sources of Environmental Information (IRS) was instituted as a pilot project of the UN Environment Programme<sup>1/</sup> in conformity with the decisions of the first session of the Governing Council. The basic requirement of the IRS, as specified by experts attending meetings in London and Geneva, and as endorsed by the first session of the Governing Council, was to provide a global mechanism by which those requiring access to substantive information on environmental matters could readily be put in touch with those most likely to possess such information. Since the initiation of activities of the pilot phase, the concept of IRS has been clarified and amplified, with the advice of experts from developed and developing countries who attended further meetings in Heidelberg and Nairobi.

2. The basic directory service of the IRS has now been fully defined and is available using a limited but rapidly growing number of sources of environmental information which have stated their readiness to assist UNEP in making such information available to Governments.

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<sup>1/</sup> Decisions 1(I), paras. 4(d), 12C(v) and 30 of General Assembly, Official Records; Twenty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 25(A/9025).

II. GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING IRS AS AN OPERATIONAL SYSTEM AND FOR DETERMINING ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE REST OF THE UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME SUCH AS THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING SYSTEM (GEMS) AND OTHER DATA COLLECTING AND INFORMATION ANALYSING ACTIVITIES

3. The experts noted that the IRS was the first step in making arrangements for improving access to environmental information and data necessary to monitor and manage environmental resources and their use, thus ensuring an adequate information input into the UN Environment Programme.

4. The experts noted more specifically that the proposals for the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS) as now envisaged in UNEP/GC/24, together with the other data collecting and information producing activities detailed in UNEP/GC/14/Add.2, represented complementary efforts in developing a management information systems framework for the UN Environment Programme and for interested Member States, regional bodies and other appropriate organizations.

5. The experts noted that the following considerations were relevant to the development of the IRS central unit, IRS focal points and IRS networks:

- (i) Policy and co-ordinating mechanisms;
- (ii) Functions;
- (iii) Communications channels to and from the IRS central unit;
- (iv) Communications channels, nationally, regionally and locally within a focal point responsibility or network.

And, in particular the following points will require attention:

- (a) Investigating the extent to which the central unit and focal points share the same level of detail on sources of information;
- (b) Investigating the extent to which arrangement for focal points are either hierarchical or otherwise;
- (c) Confirming that the national or regional focal point will normally be the primary contact between the IRS and national partners (sources or users);

- (d) Determining the relationship of the IRS to other information systems which lie outside the environmental field;
- (e) Encouraging the further development of the network concept of IRS to make the maximum use of existing and planned data and information capabilities of all kinds;
- (f) Surveying and identifying the information sources within the priority subject areas for inclusion in the IRS, notwithstanding the ultimate desire for as complete a coverage as possible;
- (g) Ensuring appropriate simplicity and flexibility of design and operation so that all Member States and appropriate organizations can be partners in IRS;
- (h) Using IRS systems designs and files as management tools in carrying out surveys of what work is presently being done in specific priority subject areas and in helping to identify gaps in this work and new areas of concern;
- (i) Experimenting as quickly as possible with various methods of communication within the context of IRS and informing all partners on available techniques for IRS activities and how these may best be adapted to the requirements of partners in developing countries and made available to them;
- (j) Identifying the functional and institutional implications of all phases of IRS operations ranging from collecting to sorting, sifting and using the details collected on information sources;
- (k) Choosing where possible systems designs for IRS activities best suited to the tasks rather than utilizing less-appropriate existing programmes developed for other purposes;
- (l) Co-ordinating ideas on terms and conditions for IRS services as detailed in the following chapters.

### III. DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRS CENTRAL UNIT AND ITS COMMUNICATION LINKS

6. It is emphasized that the IRS central unit should be very strong, both in the services offered and in the level of professional expertise available to carry out its task.

7. The technical recommendations of the experts on the operation of this central unit are attached as Annex I. The meeting makes the following observations and recommendations to the Executive Director in respect of the setting-up of this central facility and the services it offers.

#### The Directory

8. The efficient operation of the IRS directory demands strict quality control on the input to it. Consequently, it is essential that the IRS central unit should be well equipped, particularly in respect of trained manpower with ability to scrutinize, edit and comment on input.

9. Special attention should be paid to adapting the IRS directory services to the needs of developing countries. In particular, it is strongly emphasized that the IRS central unit should allot priority to the development of a range of printed directories and other manual-retrieval aids in order that the directory services may be readily utilized by a range of users who may wish to operate at various levels of technical complexity.

#### Fees for IRS directory services

10. It is recommended that for an initial period of two years, all IRS directory services should be provided free of charge. This means that the answer to the question: "Where can I find information on ..." should be provided free. In addition, printed directories, retrieval aids and other IRS directory services (such as regularly up-dated microform, tapes, computer programmes, etc.) should be provided free of charge.

11. It is recognized, however, that if the demand for these services is excessive, the supply might have to be restricted to one copy free of charge to each designated focal point.

12. The cost of providing such services should be borne by the Environment Fund until the economics of the operations of the central unit can be reviewed at the Governing Council, preferably at its Fourth Session.

#### Staffing

13. It is important to ensure the quality of the staff employed by recruiting experts in such fields as file management, environmental information science, communications technology and environmental terminology. In addition, the central facility should be staffed with appropriate personnel to assist in providing technical assistance and training for the establishment of national focal points in developing countries.

14. The Executive Director should be given the authority to recruit personnel and allocate funds for IRS to match the demands made upon the central services as these develop. In the initial stages, the number of staff should be governed not only by the load of work (which will increase sharply with time) but also by the range and depth of expertise required to provide an efficient and responsive service.

#### Central unit procedures and confidential information

15. The central unit should normally exchange input forms and other IRS material through designated focal points. However, where otherwise desired or where the focal points have not yet been designated, Governments may permit the central unit to exchange IRS material directly with potential IRS partners.

16. Governments should be encouraged to specify as soon as possible the route that they wished IRS queries and answers to take. The central unit itself should not seek or hold any information that is classified or otherwise restricted. It is entirely up to the suppliers of information to decide what material they would or would not be willing to supply.

17. The experts were convinced that the success of IRS will depend on the co-operation between all of the partners in the IRS network. In particular, recipients of IRS services are expected to share their experience with both the IRS central unit and other partners. The central unit should continuously circulate the names and addresses of national and other focal points.

#### Communication links

18. In its operational phase, IRS should emphasize the development of an active network of communication channels and focal points to ensure the distribution of the benefits of participation of all Member States.

19. Towards this end, it is recommended that IRS should establish the appropriate staff facility for the implementation of a network development programme. This programme should support the establishment of the necessary IRS facilities and should co-ordinate with other UNEP activities of the network partners.

This support should include:

- (a) Determination of need, systems design and the provision of peripheral hardware, software, communication links and the like;
- (b) Instruction manuals, operating guidelines, and assistance in training, etc.

#### Bibliographic sources

20. The experts took note of the fact that a large number of bibliographic reference works on environmental scientific, technical and legal information already exist and recommended that IRS utilize these wherever possible and make them known to Governments.

#### Location of the IRS central unit

21. Following General Assembly Resolution 3004 (XXVII) of 15 December 1972, entitled "location of the environment secretariat", experts considered it would be logical to place the IRS central unit in Nairobi. It might, however, be necessary to continue for a period of time to rely on a variety of existing technical facilities located outside, including those of the UN system. Experts recommended that the Executive Director should bear in mind the need to facilitate the transfer of the IRS to Nairobi and to develop an appropriate programme for this transfer so that the question of location could be reviewed at the Fourth Session of the Governing Council.



22. They suggested in this connexion that the Executive Director might find it useful to initiate an overall study of the communications requirements, information handling structure and public information techniques of the UN Environment Programme as a whole. The requirements of the IRS and its development into a global operational system would be an important element in this study which might also consider the contribution which wider use of the communications facilities established for IRS might make to the general economy and efficiency of the UNEP operation. In this context they noted also the recommendations contained in UNEP/GC/24 and suggested that the Executive Director might examine the feasibility of co-ordinating the operations of IRS and the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS).

#### IV. DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL AND OTHER REFERRAL SYSTEM FOCAL POINTS AND NETWORKS

##### The network concept

23. The central unit of the IRS should be the co-ordinating unit of the IRS network. The latter consists of an inter-connected network of focal points and other IRS partners.

24. UN and other international agencies should be particularly active partners in this network. Whereas these agencies should, within their available resources, provide the central unit and each other with information at the operational level, policy decisions concerning the relationship of these agencies with UNEP and with each other should be a matter for the Environment Co-ordination Board.

##### Focal points

25. The central unit of the IRS should stimulate the formation of a variety of focal points both in terms of their subject or geographical jurisdiction and in terms of their technological and organizational pattern. In particular, the IRS should stimulate the development of international, regional, national, local and sectoral focal points; should invite proposals for their formation and development and should develop suitable guidelines for their establishment and operation. This role should include the provision of financial and technical assistance to those countries which seek them.

26. The group of experts considered reports from Australia, Canada, the FRG, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the US on projects now under way or being planned in these countries for the establishment of national focal points.

27. It became evident that there would be a considerable variety in the organization and operation of such focal points. This variety was recognized by the experts as being a valuable part of the experimental approach towards finding optimum systems for focal points and for data exchange.

28. The experts recommend that further proposals for the establishment of focal points should be invited from Member States and model focal points should be established covering a variety of technological and organizational patterns. To facilitate this, the UNEP secretariat should ensure that a careful survey is conducted to determine the needs of member Governments in this regard, bearing in mind, in particular, communication between focal points of environmentally similar but geographically distinct areas.

Relationship between focal points in the IRS

29. The organization of the focal points should be such as to ensure that their relationship to each other and the central unit can be established at various levels of technical and organizational complexity.

30. There exists a special relationship between the focal points established as partners in the IRS network and others that may be established in relation to the other programme activities of UNEP, such as envisaged for the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS) in UNEP/GC/24.

31. There should be the closest possible liaison between the IRS and UNISIST focal points as also between the focal points and the actual sources of information. This will obviate much needless duplication of effort in the handling and processing of requests for information.

32. The group meeting also received reports about a number of projects in support of the pilot operation of the IRS. They pertain to the establishment of two pilot focal points on the local level, the development of the partner guide to the IRS, and to manual and intermediate technology level options, which make available the directory of the IRS and other material such as supporting documents, the environmental law of several countries, etc. The results are in operational condition. Informal documents about these projects can be obtained through the UNEP secretariat.

V. TRAINING AND OTHER FORMS OF ASSISTANCE TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES  
TO ENABLE THEM TO ESTABLISH REFERRAL SYSTEM FOCAL POINTS  
AND USE THE IRS TO BEST ADVANTAGE

33. The experts emphasized the importance of the IRS as the basic information exchange element on the specialized management functions of the UN Environment Programme as envisaged in Chapter III of UNEP/GC/14/Add.2, namely Environmental Assessment (IRS and GEMS), Environmental Management and the support services, which include Information, Education, Training and Technical Assistance. It was noted that the successful implementation of action in the priority subject areas of the UN Environment Programme depends on the efficient operation of IRS activities in particular and of these specialized management facilities as a whole.

34. The experts recommended that consideration should be given to the desirability of placing IRS, GEMS and some or all of the other management functions envisaged in Chapter III of UNEP/GC/14/Add.2 and UNEP/GC/24 under a single directorship.

35. The exact nature of how Member States can influence the implementation of IRS and related activities as detailed in Chapter III of UNEP/GC/14/Add.2, apart from informal meetings of experts, remains to be worked out in practice in accordance with Governing Council policy.

36. The importance of an integrated approach to the provision of assistance was stressed. There was agreement on the need for a programme for the accelerated development of the necessary institutional capability to enable developing countries to participate fully in IRS activities and thus in the wider UN Environment Programme.

37. The experts recommended a programme of appropriate assistance to developing countries to include:

- (a) The assessment of need and the development of the appropriate information infrastructure facilities;
- (b) The co-ordinated development of model focal points for IRS. These may, where appropriate, include other focal point responsibilities for GEMS, Environmental Management, and

the provision of a nucleus for UNEP activities in Information, Education, Training and Technical Assistance.

38. The resources required, which include institutional facilities; education and training; manpower; information and data facilities; and communication channels, will need to be supported by the development of appropriate policies for the co-ordination and utilization of these resources.

39. To ensure the maximum benefits from the limited resources available to the IRS, co-ordination will extend to the related programmes of the specialized agencies and organizations of the UN family.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

40. The informal meeting of experts recommends that the Executive Director request the Governing Council to authorize him to establish the IRS along the lines discussed in this report.

41. On the conclusion of its deliberations, the meeting adopted the recommendations contained in Chapters III, IV, V and Annex I.

42. Detailed cost estimates for the recommendations for action and assistance contained in this report have not yet been made. In formulating their recommendations the experts recognized that these would be implemented within the framework of the budgetary allocations proposed by the Executive Director in UNEP/GC/14/Add.2, but only to the extent that funds were available and their allocation for these purposes was approved by the Governing Council.

ANNEX

TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE OPERATION OF THE  
CENTRAL UNIT OF IRS

The Directory and record format

The central unit should accept such input as could be provided by network partners in forms most convenient to them. This means that, whereas the input format should be the agreed IRS format, this may be supplied either as copies of completed input forms or in machine-readable form.

The input form, when it is sent out, should be accompanied by a clear set of instructions and a worked example to help the source to complete the form.

The Directory record format should be made more flexible. It is recommended that the record should be a combination of fixed and variable-length (flagged) fields.

In addition to the existing fields, the record should contain an indication of the existence of supporting background documentation made available by the source.

The central unit should explore the various options for inputting the data and suitable data-compression techniques.

Input form

A number of recommendations have been made to the secretariat concerning the design, format, contents and wording of the input form.

Output

Whereas priority should be accorded to producing printed output, the importance and possible cost advantages of microform should be fully exploited.

Environmental Thesaurus and authority list

It is strongly recommended that the Executive Director accord the highest priority to the further development of a periodically up-dated environmental thesaurus. In this connexion, the group of experts considers the draft proposal of the ILO, outlined by the secretariat, as being a suitable one for funding. Further, in co-operation with Governments and the specialized agencies and organizations of the UN family, the IRS should encourage and assist the publication of bilingual or multilingual thesauri using one of the UN languages and the most widely used regional languages in the pertinent group of developing countries.

It is emphasized that, pending the development of this thesaurus, the present authority list of Subject Attributes needs up-dating and revision. Although the group of experts at this meeting made some changes to the list of attributes, the group requests the Executive Director to have this task completed as soon as possible.