



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/C.1/13/4/Rev.1
14 April 1986
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Technical Committee
Fourth session
19-22 April 1986
Baghdad

Item 6(a) of the provisional agenda

FOLLOW-UP ON RESOLUTIONS OF THE COMMISSION

- (a) Resolution 131 (XI): Information system at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia



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Corrigendum

The title of document E/ESCWA/C.1/13/4/Rev.1 should read as above.

Page 1, section B, paragraph 1, third line

For Information and Data Processing Division

read Informatics Division

(a) Resolution 131 (XI), "Information System at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia"

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant changes to have taken place in the last two decades is the growing importance of information systems as instruments for progress in the broad spectrum of socio-economic, technological and cultural spheres.

Some years ago ESCWA was one of the first institutions in the region to foresee the significant role of information systems and the importance of establishing one. For a United Nations regional commission continuous information regarding developments in the region, and in substantive fields is crucial. Today many national and regional institutions have their own information systems established but ESCWA, due to lack of financial resources, remains behind in that area of endeavour. It hampers the Commission's ability to contribute to the economic and social development of the region.

Information is a vital element of development at both the national and international levels. The dissemination and exchange of information through subregional, regional and international infrastructures and networks are functions of central importance that enhance effective implementation of development programmes at all levels and help to bridge the gap between developing and developed countries.

A. LEGISLATIVE MANDATES

Pursuant to the pertinent General Assembly, Economic and Social Council resolutions on establishment, strengthening and co-ordination of information systems the Eleventh Session of the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia adopted Resolution 131(XI) which requested the Executive Secretary to:

1. Elaborate a comprehensive programme of work to develop the secretariat's information structure within the context of the 1986-1987 programmes of work and priorities;

2. Further requested the Executive Secretary to co-operate with Arab, regional and international organizations for the purpose of co-ordinating the information programme, ensuring complementarity and preventing duplication.

B. ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY ESCWA

1. To achieve its objectives in the field of computerized information systems efficiently the secretariat initiated a centralization of information activities in the newly proposed Information and Data Processing Division. Activities of the division would cover: (a) establishment of the regional statistical data bank; (b) establishment of the regional documentation data bank; (c) development of common methodical tools; (d) development of standards in conformity with existing national and regional standards for data acquisition, evaluation etc.; (e) dissemination and exchange of information; and (f) training;

2. To make the establishment of a computerized information system possible the secretariat during the past biennium completed installation of the IBM 4331 Computer. However, due to budgetary constraints its processing power and capacity are not sufficient to meet all the requirements. Careful analysis nevertheless indicates that it could be upgraded to the required extent, resources permitting;

3. Furthermore, to promote research directed towards development and enhancement of computerized information systems the secretariat during the last biennium made available and accessible to ESCWA research staff several computer software packages enabling them to handle and process data;

4. During the 1984-1985 biennium the secretariat undertook several exercises under its divisions aimed at laying a basis for further development of information systems. Among the most important were the following: (a) pilot study on national accounts; (b) creation of industrial statistics on ESCWA member States; (c) initiation of the regional information network on natural resources; (d) creation of the standardized agriculture country profiles; (e) creation of trade statistics on the direction and structure of trade of ESCWA members for years 1980-1984; (f) creation of a standardized information programme on transnational corporations.

With reference to (b) a system has been established to use the magnetic tape of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) data base. With reference to (d) a similar effort is under way to use the data base of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). With regard to (c) establishment is envisaged of a regional information network on New and Renewable Sources of Energy (NRSE); at the time of writing, a consultant's report is expected on participating countries' capabilities and the estimated cost of soft and hardware to establish national NRSE information infrastructures in Egypt, Iraq and Jordan. Apart from this, contacts have been made with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) for closer co-operation to enlarge the scope of the proposed NRSE network;

5. During the biennium 1984-1985 the ESCWA secretariat did not spare efforts aimed at establishment of a direct link of its computer with the United Nations information network and simultaneously with national and regional networks. In the current stage of development of information systems at all levels an isolation of the ESCWA system could be fatal mistake; the secretariats concern in this regard therefore has the highest priority;

6. With regard to the establishment of a computerized documentation system the secretariat has taken the necessary steps to identify objectives, activities and needs as well as measures to be taken towards implementing the project. The secretariat is of the opinion that the system should play a central role in the region. To achieve its objectives it is imperative that the ESCWA system be fully integrated with and directly linked to existing national, regional and international documentation systems through telecommunication networks and able to "speak" the same language as the other systems. To meet the last condition is unfortunately beyond the range of computer facilities existing in the Commission at present. A lack of

resources constitutes a regrettable obstacle both to the expansion of these facilities and to the establishment of a computerized documentation system.

C. PROGRAMME OF WORK

In the field of computerized information systems the Secretariat wishes to pursue the following elements in the work plan for the biennium 1986-1987:

1. Establishment of direct links with the United Nations Headquarters and regional organizations for the exchange of information as a basis for further development;
2. Establishment of a computerized documentation system based on bilingual Arabic/English software ensuring complementarity at both the national and regional levels.

Among those organizations that have already established information systems based on Arabized software are the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Arab Industrial Development Organization (AIDO), Arab Organization Agricultural Development (AOAD), Arab League Documentation Centre (ALDOC), Arab Gulf States Documentation Centre (AGSDC), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and many national information institutions. ESCWA should join them as soon as possible. However, this exercise would involve a major investment of financial resources in acquisition of an appropriate version of a Hewlett-Packard computer, a bilingual Arabic/English version of the MINISIS package, staffing of the documentation centre and training;

3. Establishment of the Regional Statistical Data Bank in conformity with the methodology developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Statistical Computing Project and regional requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission's members could be instrumental in realizing the above-proposed work programme for the biennium 1986-1987 by:

1. Encouraging the creation of the regional information network;
2. Providing the financial resources needed for establishment of the Commission's computerized documentation system;
3. Releasing information required to build up the Regional Statistical Data Bank.

