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PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993

Review of translation and interpretation services for all official languages in the Economic Commission for Africa

Note by the Secretary-General

INTRODUCTION

1. At its forty-fifth session, the General Assembly reviewed the issue of translation and interpretation services for all official languages in the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and adopted resolution 45/248 B of 21 December 1990, section II, on the subject, whereby it:

"1. Expresses its concern over the difficulties experienced by the Economic Commission for Africa, particularly in the area of conference services;

"2. Requests the Secretary-General to take action for the revival of a training programme for translators/précis-writers in all official languages of the Economic Commission for Africa and to report to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, through the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, on the measures taken;

"3. Also requests the Secretary-General to ensure that this training programme is comparable in quality with other similar United Nations training programmes and to make every effort to utilize existing facilities and expertise within the region;

"4. Invites the Secretary-General to take appropriate measures to ensure the immediate recruitment of those candidates who, after completing their training, have passed the competitive translators/précis-writers examinations;

"5. Further requests the Secretary-General to make proposals in the programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993 on the improvement of conference services in the Economic Commission for Africa, including the provision of a permanent staff for interpretation;

"6. Decides to consider again the question of conference services for the Economic Commission for Africa at its forty-sixth session, in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993;"

2. The present note, prepared in response to that resolution, treats successively translation services, interpretation services and other conference services issues.

I. TRANSLATION SERVICES

3. The note submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its forty-fifth session (A/C.5/45/26) indicated, inter alia, that a major obstacle to effective translation services in ECA was a high vacancy rate in those services. Currently, translator posts are filled from a roster of successful candidates to a competitive examination in one of the official United Nations languages. Examinations are held at intervals depending on the number of vacancies and the number of available candidates on the roster at a given time. Successful candidates are assigned to vacant posts at all United Nations duty stations. Difficulties have been experienced for the filling of vacant posts in ECA. In order to alleviate these difficulties, a number of measures were introduced, including efforts to recruit candidates from countries of the ECA region. As a result, the vacancy rate at the ECA Translation Services Unit was 33 per cent at 31 August 1991, compared with 41 per cent in 1990 and 47 per cent in 1989. Furthermore, through the temporary assignment of translators from other duty stations, the total Professional capacity of the Unit has also been strengthened.

4. In order to find a more durable solution to the problems experienced by translation services in ECA, it is proposed to re-establish a training programme for translators to be recruited primarily for ECA. This programme would be set up on a contractual basis with existing African training institutions. Training would be offered to five persons each year for each of the three ECA official languages, namely Arabic, English and French. The training would be scheduled over a nine-month period and would aim at providing specific skills in United Nations style and terminology to enable participants to succeed in the United Nations translator/précis-writer competitive examination.

5. For the selection of appropriate institutions to host the training programme, a survey is currently being made of existing institutions in African countries that provide translator training in Arabic, English and French. By the end of 1991, at least three institutions would be identified.

6. Candidates for participation in the programme would be selected from among persons who hold a degree or an equivalent qualification from a university or institution of equivalent status, and should meet the same requirements as those established for the United Nations competitive examination for translators/précis-writers.

7. The opportunity to participate in the programme would be widely advertised in the press or other appropriate means early each year of States members of ECA as well as in other countries or centres where a number of African nationals specializing in languages and translation work may be studying or working. Applicants would be interviewed and also go through pre-selection and aptitude tests, in order to complete the selection of candidates by mid-year. The training course would start in September and continue until May of the next year. At the end of the course, students would sit for the regular world-wide examination for translators/précis-writers. Successful candidates would be required to serve an initial assignment for a specified period in ECA.

8. The costs of these arrangements would comprise education fees to be paid to the institutions, stipends to students and travel expenses between their home country and the contracted institution. Such costs have been estimated as follows (at 1991 rates):

(a) Travel costs: \$2,900 per student, or \$43,500 per year;

(b) Stipend: \$1,700 per person/per month, or \$229,500 per year;

(c) Fees for education institutions: \$5,500 per student, or \$82,500 per year.

9. These estimates have been used in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993, which includes, in section 23, Economic Commission for Africa, a provision of \$710,700 for the reviving of the training programme for translators at ECA.

10. The training programme would be launched in 1992, along the lines outlined above. Additional expenses might be necessary in relation with the selection process of candidates, namely, travel and subsistence costs for travel of applicants from their home countries to Addis Ababa for interviews and tests. Should such costs be necessary, they would, to the extent possible, be absorbed from within the overall 1992-1993 budget of the training programme.

II. INTERPRETATION SERVICES

11. In his note on the subject to the General Assembly at its forty-fifth session (A/C.5/45/26), the Secretary-General proposed to the General Assembly that, given the pattern of distribution of meetings and conferences requiring interpretation services during the year, ECA should continue to rely on the use of freelance interpreters to service its meetings. The question of establishing a permanent team of interpreters has been further examined in terms of its cost to the Organization and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of ECA. It has been estimated that uninterrupted services would require three interpreters (one P-4, and two P-3 posts) for each of the three official languages of ECA (Arabic, English and French). The annual cost of three P-4 and six P-3 posts would be \$680,300 (at 1991 rates). In addition, the budget for interpreters would need to make allowance for freelance interpreters to meet peak periods throughout the year. The period leading to the ECA Conference of Ministers, for example, normally calls for an additional demand for interpreters. That provision is estimated at \$150,000, and the overall cost of interpretation would be approximately \$800,000. As a comparison, the use of freelance interpreters required expenditure of \$488,500 in 1988, \$494,100 in 1989 and \$405,100 in 1990. It should also be noted that freelance interpreters provide ECA with the flexibility of scheduling meetings to cope with the changing needs of the region. It is therefore recommended that the present system of using freelance interpreters to service ECA meetings and conferences be maintained. The matter would, however, be kept under review.

III. OTHER CONFERENCE SERVICES ISSUES

12. A review of the ECA Conference Services Section as a whole has been conducted in order to estimate the adequacy of its staff and technological capacity to meet the Commission's current and future conference-servicing requirements.

13. The staff capacity has been analysed on the basis of workload statistics for the period 1986-1990. It would seem that the number of posts of translators (16 Professional posts) is sufficient. The review has, however, revealed a number of shortcomings with respect to the planning of meetings and conferences, compliance with standards and the quality and timely preparation of documentation. These problems stem in part from a lack of editorial functions. The effective planning and organizing of ECA meetings is essential. The Conference of Ministers of ECA currently has 26 subsidiary sectoral and subregional conferences and committees, which in turn have a number of subsidiary intergovernmental and expert bodies. All those organs have annual or biennial meetings that are sometimes held away from ECA headquarters. It is proposed to establish, effective 1 January 1992, a separate planning function, within the ECA Conference Services Section, with a post at the P-5 level. This post would be redeployed from within the ECA secretariat, as indicated in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

14. It is also proposed to establish an Editorial Unit within the same Conference Services Section. The Unit would be supervised by the P-5 officer referred to above and would comprise one P-4 and one P-2 posts for editors. The P-4 post is proposed to be established effective 1 January 1992 as a new post. The P-2 post would be redeployed from within the ECA secretariat. These proposals have also been made in the 1992-1993 proposed programme budget under section 23.

15. As regards the technological capacity of ECA for meeting its conference-servicing requirements, the review has indicated the need for replacement of outdated reproduction equipment and for improving the environment in the existing Reproduction Unit. These issues have been addressed in the context of the implementation of the ECA automation project during 1991. By the end of 1991, all original texts of documents and publications will be processed on micro-computers, thus eliminating double typing and improving both timeliness and quality of work. Graphic presentation will also be done on micro-computers (electronic or desk-top publishing). In parallel with computerization of the Conference Services Section, the ECA reproduction facilities are also being modernized through installation of advanced reproduction equipment. Designed to improve the timeliness and quality of ECA documents and publications, this scheme will be fully implemented by the end of 1991. The related funds have been approved in the context of the 1990-1991 revised estimates.

16. The expected completion of construction of a new conference complex at ECA will increase, as estimated, the number of meetings and conferences to be held at Addis Ababa and relating demand for conference services. Conference-servicing requirements at ECA, including the possible establishment of a permanent ECA interpretation facility, will be kept under review in the light of the overall demand for such services and of the completion of the new conference complex at Addis Ababa.
