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PROGRAMME PLANNING

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the status of internal
evaluation in United Nations system organizations and second
report on evaluation in the United Nations system

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the status of internal evaluation in the United Nations system organizations (A/36/181) and on the second report on evaluation in the United Nations system (A/36/182).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the status of internal evaluation in individual United Nations system organizations (JIU/REP/81/5) and the companion report on evaluation in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/81/6), prepared by Inspector Earl D. Sohm, together form a most constructive and useful contribution by JIU to the establishment and implementation of evaluation systems within the United Nations system. These reports are a welcome follow-up to the JIU's initial report in 1977 on evaluation in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/77/1). It will be recalled that the general assessment of the Joint Inspection Unit then was that, while little real evaluation work was being done, "interest in evaluation, which had fluctuated since the 1950s, appeared to be at a 'take-off' point." The report described evaluation activities in some 13 organizations of the system. This information has been considerably expanded and updated in the first of the two recent reports (JUI/REP/81/5). A total of 23 organizations have been covered, nearly double the number covered in the 1977 report. Specific recommendations are offered for 16 of the 23 organizations reviewed.

2. The second of the two reports (JIU/REP/81/6) discusses system-wide developments, patterns and problems which have occurred as well as progress made in establishing internal evaluation systems. The report also considers the critical stage of implementation on which JIU considers that many of the organizations are now embarking. The report makes a series of general recommendations for enhancing understanding and support for the evaluation function and for strengthening its contributions.

3. The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) strongly supports the thesis articulated in the JIU reports that evaluation should be seen as essential and integral to the processes of policy formulation, programme planning, budgeting and implementation management rather than being perceived merely as a desirable addition to these processes. ACC feels that the report offers an excellent basis for a necessary five-year review of the direction which organizations within the system are taking individually and as a collective whole. The JIU report should prove most valuable as a guide to United Nations organizations in developing their own managerial and evaluation systems and assessing progress in harmonizing these systems over the coming years since it synthesizes guidelines which are based on analysis of a variety of operational experiences while at the same time recognizing the diversity of programme and organizational situations throughout the United Nations system.

4. A closely related finding by JIU is that the major problem at this stage in the development of internal evaluation systems is that the amount of resources devoted to the staffing of evaluation units is very small. A number of the report's recommendations on individual units encourages strengthening those units by additional staff. The ACC agrees that the allocation of adequate resources is essential to the development of evaluation skills and institutional capability and that such skills and capability are in turn critical preconditions which must be in

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place if evaluation is to support effectively key policy, programme, budget and other management processes. Some organizations, noting that they face a zero growth situation for the next programme biennium, are concerned that it may not be possible significantly to strengthen the staffing of their evaluation units in the near future. However, the organizations do recognize that the question of strengthening the evaluation function is closely linked with the type of mechanism used, centrally located evaluation unit within the organization, built-in self-evaluation or both, and that if augmentation of resources is not possible, then shifts in emphasis and priority may permit redeployment of resources.

5. Budget constraints mean that available resources must be employed selectively and judiciously if they are to achieve maximum efficiency and programme impact. Evaluation can point the way by identifying areas of lesser and greater effectiveness and by assessing the actual versus planned consequences of different programme strategies. A modest level of resources allotted to evaluation can yield far greater programme benefits, either in the form of savings or increased effectiveness.

II. STATUS OF INTERNAL EVALUATION IN UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS (JIU/REP/81/5)

General comments

6. ACC is in general agreement with the approach of the report subject to certain qualifications indicated in the following comments. It also feels that the coverage and scope of this report is sufficiently wide and that the selected bibliography of recent documents annexed is most useful.

Comments on specific recommendations

7. On the question of resources, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements while agreeing with the assessment and recommendations in paragraph 7 (b) of the report that a monitoring and evaluation officer should be assigned full-time to these duties so that the present system can be further developed to meet management and reporting needs, it should be noted that no resources will be available to implement this recommendation in the near future.

8. UNIDO wishes to note in reference to paragraph 7 (h) that: (a) on 7 May 1981, the Executive Director of UNIDO established an Advisory Committee on Evaluation composed of division directors to, inter alia, oversee the immediate design and installation of a comprehensive internal evaluation system, and (b) that the Industrial Development Board, at its fifteenth session, requested the Executive Director to install such a system by the spring of 1982. In effect, this recommendation by JIU has already been acted upon by the UNIDO secretariat.

9. Reference is made to paragraph 7 (d) where it is stated that "UNDP should designate full-time staff in the Bureau for Programme Policy and Evaluation with responsibilities for further developing, strengthening and overseeing an effective

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evaluation system throughout UNDP, including regional bureaux and field offices". While UNDP agrees that it would be desirable to strengthen the staff responsible for evaluation in UNDP, it wishes to point out that the participation in evaluation activities of as many as 15 technical advisers and other staff of the BPPE together with the staff of regional bureaux and field offices as well as consultants indicates that UNDP's total commitment of staff time to evaluation is much greater than it might appear.

10. In section XVII of the report on the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), it is also stated that evaluation activity in ITU is confined to the Technical Co-operation Department. It should be noted, however, that although that Department undertakes most of the evaluation work in collaboration with UNDP and the recipient Government during tripartite reviews of technical co-operation projects, it also performs ad hoc evaluation in connexion with a variety of activities such as training. ITU believes that the federal structure of the Union at the secretariat level, the decentralization of the legislative organs and the wide variety of highly specialized tasks carried out in different organs precludes creation of a central evaluation unit.

III. SECOND REPORT ON EVALUATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM (JIU/REP/81/6)

General comments

11. ACC notes that the report states in paragraph 11 that the most significant pattern emerging from the 1980 survey of evaluation system status is the growing acceptance of built-in self-evaluation as the basic component of most organizations' internal evaluation systems. While generally supporting this trend, ACC would sound a note of caution since acceptance of this approach by some organizations does not necessarily mean that self-evaluation is either more objective than alternative approaches or that it is more cost-effective. ACC feels that wherever possible built-in evaluation must be complemented by a control mechanism such as that of a centrally placed evaluation unit. It should also be noted here that the choice as to the type of evaluation best suited to an organization is often determined by the structure of a particular organization and the nature of its activities. These factors might in turn limit the scope of the kind of internal evaluation proposed by the report. Non-programmable substantive and operational support for negotiations leading to international agreements, codes of conduct etc., is an example of an organizational activity in which programme objectives are difficult to formulate and consequently evaluation methodology remains to be developed. When such methods are formulated, the most appropriate organizational arrangements for their application can be identified.

12. In the discussion on central evaluation units (paras. 15-20), it might be more informative as it would elsewhere in the report (paras. 22, for example), to have a table illustrating the location of the central evaluation units in

various United Nations agencies and organizations, their staffing strength, degree of involvement in evaluation, and areas covered (whether headquarters or field activities).

13. On the question of coverage discussed in paragraph 21 (a), ACC would point out that little scope has been given in the report to the evaluation of policies. Policies establish the legal framework and priorities which govern the formulation of programmes. Since the approach to evaluation is determined by the nature of the activity being evaluated, it is felt that evaluation of normative policies is different from the evaluation of programmes which are formulated on the basis of, and in response to such policies.

14. In paragraph 23, ACC feels that the statement that evaluation of field projects and headquarters programmes "differ considerably in terms of the methodology, staffing and resource requirements ..." may be somewhat premature as very little work has yet been done on headquarters programmes. The report does not indicate where these differences may lie, and it would have been helpful had it done so. Clearly further work in this area is called for.

15. ACC is pleased to note that evaluation activities exist in the system on a wider scale than ever before and that the number of organizations which have developed internal evaluation systems has increased from two to 12 since the 1977 JIU/REP/81/6 summary. As noted in paragraph 3, ACC shares the Inspector's view that it is important to integrate evaluation with the organizational decision-making process in an over-all management development effort and notes with satisfaction that most of the organizations reviewed have emphasized this integration (JIU/REP/81/6, paras. 28 and 29).

16. The question of feedback of evaluation findings into planning and programming is addressed in paragraph 31. ACC would also note the importance of building preconditions for evaluation into the planning and programming processes as is set out in paragraph 51. This reciprocal linkage is already included in paragraph 31 (c). Some concrete suggestions for follow-up would be welcome in paragraph 31 (h).

17. ACC would agree that there is a growing interest and activity in co-operative efforts to strengthen the activities of Governments to evaluate their own programme and that this is a logical extension of efforts of organizations within the United Nations system to develop evaluation systems (para. 76). The proposed JIU study in 1981 in this area is welcomed and it is hoped that it will throw some light on the reasons why Governments are still reluctant to participate fully in evaluation/review missions.

18. Paragraph 81 of the report states that not many individual project evaluations have been conducted and that in 1979 UNDP reported that only one third of those evaluations called for by the procedures were carried out. In this connexion it should be pointed out that despite this fact, over 100 large-scale projects were evaluated in each of the years 1976 to 1978 and that this level of activity continues to be maintained.

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Comments on specific conclusions and recommendations

19. In general, ACC agrees with the conclusions and recommendations set out in the final section of the report and believes that they constitute an important set of guidelines for future evaluation system development. There may be some general over-optimism in the report about the degree of present acceptance and understanding of the purposes and limitations of evaluation but this varies among organizations. Individual comments on some of the specific conclusions and recommendations are given below.

20. ACC agrees with the statement in paragraph 101 (a) that the staff resources devoted to central evaluation units are small and make it difficult for them to fulfil their responsibilities. ACC's views on this issue are noted in paragraphs 4 and 5 above. ACC feels that the staffing problem might be exacerbated if those units work in isolation. Close collaboration with other units in fostering mechanisms such as built-in self-evaluation can be mutually supporting and result in strengthening both central and decentralized evaluation mechanisms. In subparagraph (b) of the same paragraph, it should be pointed out that while ACC supports the preparation of "time-phased objectives and plans" it is doubtful whether this can be achieved throughout the United Nations system in the very near future.

21. The first recommendation in paragraph 106 urges organizations which do not now have a built-in self-evaluation system to consider adopting this approach in view of its modest costs and considerable benefits. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach are presented clearly and warrant careful consideration.

22. The question of staffing dealt with in JIU recommendation 2 has already been discussed earlier in this report (see paras. 4, 5 and 19 above).

23. In paragraph 108 it is proposed that each organization should prepare for its governing bodies evaluation plans linked to the programme budget cycle. This is a useful way to introduce discipline into evaluation planning and at the same time to engage the attention of the governing body in evaluation matters. Such a plan should avoid unnecessary rigidity by recognizing that evaluation priorities and the need for specific studies may change over time. a/

24. ACC agrees with the observation in recommendation 5 in paragraph 110 that there is a tendency to use the term evaluation for studies that are not rigorous enough to warrant that label thereby undermining understanding and support for evaluation. It further agrees that organizations should ensure that the quality of their evaluation products is assessed on a continuing basis.

a/ The JIU recommendation is less applicable to units such as the World Food Programme (WFP) in which: (a) evaluation is almost entirely focused on implementation of the food assistance activity, and (b) the biennial budget cycle is confined to internal administration.

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25. ACC agrees with recommendation 7 in paragraph 112 that evaluation findings should be harmonized with performance reporting. In preparing such reports to governing bodies, care should be taken to organize the information in a way which recognizes that monitoring actual ongoing performance and evaluating accomplishment and impact are related but distinct functions.

26. ACC is aware that JIU will be completing later in 1981 a study on a related topic, that is, providing assistance to Governments for strengthening their evaluation capabilities. It would therefore suggest that the recommendation in paragraph 113 could be more properly viewed at that time.

27. In commenting on recommendation 9 in paragraph 114 which primarily concerns the improvement of UNDP's system and procedure for evaluating, reference is also made to paragraph 85. The views in the latter paragraph actually endorse planned UNDP action to implement new measures to enhance the quality of technical co-operation. Moreover, measures described under sections (a) on tripartite reviews and (e) on individual projects are already being implemented in UNDP. With regard to section (b) on final project reports, the recommendation does not appear to take fully into account the fact that revised instructions issued in 1978 already provide for full tripartite participation and a more active governmental role in preparing reports. Section (d) on evaluation of country programme implementation was approved by the UNDP Governing Council in 1980 and provides for periodic reviews of country programmes which include an assessment of the implementation and effectiveness of activities under the country programme.

28. ACC feels that recommendation 10 in paragraph 115 on the need to examine the adequacy of staff training programmes is highly relevant even though training in evaluation should probably be integrated with broader management training rather than be confined to specific evaluation courses. The importance of training materials for United Nations staff as well as for national staff could perhaps receive greater attention in the report.
