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Joint Inspection Unit

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on United Nations system support for science and technology in Latin America and the Caribbean

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the comments of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "United Nations system support for science and technology in Latin America and the Caribbean" (see A/56/370).

I. Introduction

1.   The present report of the Joint Inspection Unit is the third in a series of reports devoted to evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of technical cooperation provided by organizations of the United Nations system to endogenous capacity-building in science and technology in developing countries. Like the previous reports in the series, on Africa and on Asia and the Pacific, the present study uses as its frame of reference the 1979 Vienna Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development. The report is also informed by subsequent global conferences, notably the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, and its Agenda 21, and by the Millennium Declaration (see General Assembly resolution 55/2).

2.   The review by the Inspectors of performance and results of 10 sample projects suggests that the organizations' capacity-building efforts in science and technology have generally been effective in responding to the priorities and programmes of the region. The Inspectors also find that the projects received strong political support, as evidenced by substantial host government funding, and that project objectives were generally consistent with United Nations system legislative mandates.

3.   At the same time, the report identifies three main weaknesses: first, the limited number of joint or multi-agency initiatives; second, the tight financial means the projects operated with, suggesting weak resource mobilization efforts on the part of the organizations concerned; and third, the projects' often ineffectual interrelation with the productive sectors and end-users, with three notable exceptions. Based on their findings, the Inspectors make several recommendations addressed to organizations and agencies of the United Nations system concerned with science and technology.

II. General comments

4.   The members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination welcome the report and its comprehensive analysis of United Nations system support for science and technology and find it interesting and informative. The report underscores the important role science and technology can play in the economic development of countries. It argues convincingly for a stronger role of the United Nations system in promoting science and technology, especially new technologies such as those in the areas of information and communication. In particular, the area of information and communication technologies for sustainable development and poverty reduction is seen by Board members as an important growth area for the future, building on successful initiatives in the region. The evaluation of 10 different projects, some of a regional nature and others country-specific, helps explain the wide diversity of methodologies, performance criteria and analytical background of the results presented in the report. It also highlights the need for further analytical work supporting evaluation efforts of this sort.

5.   The report contains a frank assessment of the state of the support system for science and technology, not only in Latin America and the Caribbean, but also in the United Nations system in general. It laments the successive dissolution of the central support structures and financing mechanisms for dealing with science and technology issues and the concomitant weakening of the substantive coordination and management of the United Nations organizations' support for capacity-building in science and technology for development.

6.   The Inspectors conclude that the Commission on Science and Technology for Development is performing the best possible coordination role in the present circumstances, but that it is greatly hindered by the lack of an appropriate support structure. They further state that the secretariat of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) deserves to have a science and technology dimension added to its core programmes, just like the other United Nations Secretariat departments. Given its work programme on technology as mandated by the UNCTAD general conferences as well as by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and the Commission on Investment, Technology and Related Financial Issues, UNCTAD finds this suggestion rather puzzling. While its role in serving as focal point for science and technology activities in the United Nations system can be improved, UNCTAD emphasizes that there has always been a science and technology dimension in its core programmes.

III. Comments on the recommendations

Recommendation 1: United Nations system joint programme for science and technology for development

"In order to enable the Member States to address more comprehensively the opportunities and risks represented for global society and international economic relations by the ongoing prodigious advances in science and technology, and to give programmatic expression to relevant provisions of the Group of 77 and China South Summit Declaration in Havana in April 2000, the Summit Declaration of the Group of 8 industrialized countries in Okinawa in July 2000, and the Secretary-General's key proposals on science and technology to the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development may wish to discuss the desirability, feasibility and timeliness of a United Nations system joint programme for science and technology, modelled on UNAIDS, for reasons and purposes discussed in paragraphs 114 to 125 of this report, and to make appropriate recommendations to the Economic and Social Council."

7. While the recommendation is formally addressed to the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development, its potential implications are relevant to the whole United Nations system. The successful initiative of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) cannot provide an adequate justification for an eventual "joint United Nations system programme for science and technology". UNAIDS is directed at fighting a specific disease with important transboundary dimensions. It is therefore particularly amenable to concerted international action, which can translate into jointly programmed sets of activities by all concerned United Nations entities, with precise objectives and resource requirements. On the other hand, the concrete shape of a United Nations system joint programme in science and technology is difficult to assess, given the pervasiveness of science and technology aspects in the work of most organizations and programmes of the United Nations system.

8. Some concern has been expressed over the difficulties of setting up new, permanent initiatives, particularly those with merely a coordinating function. As a counter-proposal, based on General Assembly resolution 55/185 of 20 December 2000, UNCTAD suggests that its coordination role could be strengthened. The Board considers that the electronic network for science and technology for development that has just been established by the UNCTAD Technology for Development Section is an excellent tool for information-sharing and for better coordination of science and technology activities within the United Nations system. Nevertheless, the requisite resources would be needed for coordination activities and, in particular, for at least one inter-agency coordination meeting a year, to be held in conjunction with the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development sessions and to be attended by agency representatives who are responsible for science and technology.

Recommendation 2: capacity-building in information technology

"(*a*) ECLAC should further expand its use of information technology as a cross-sectoral and cross-programme tool in order to enhance programmatic coordination and internal work-process efficiencies, and to assist its member countries more effectively in the implementation of the Declaration of Florianopolis (Brazil) of 21 June 2000.

"(*b*) The United Nations Development Group and specialized agencies should study IDB's policy and operational approaches to IT capacity-building in Latin America and the Caribbean, in order to derive lessons that could be applied in other developing regions."

9. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has well-established research experience in several relevant areas, including trade and trade liberalization, information technology and environment, as well as in establishing appropriate networking arrangements. It is presently undertaking research on the functioning of the national innovation system of various Latin American countries, among them Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru. A book examining recent changes in the structure and performance of the said innovation systems is in the process of being published. ECLAC

appears to be in the forefront of the United Nations system in terms of the amount of research it conducts in relation to the functioning of the region's national innovation systems. It also maintains academic and governmental contacts throughout the region in relation to the study of science and technology issues.

10.   Within its mandates and capacities, ECLAC is engaged in undertaking in earnest appropriate follow-up actions on the Declaration of Florianopolis concerning the future development of the information and communication technology sector in Latin America and its wide dissemination and acceptance by the Governments in the region. Among the supportive actions being undertaken as follow-up to the Declaration are seminars held in late November 2001 in the area of biotechnology and information technology.

11.   In the view of ECLAC, among the challenges that the Latin American and Caribbean region must face in reducing the technological lag are the legal, regulatory and institutional framework that will lower the barriers to access, ensure competition between providers offering connections to transmission networks, reduce the heterogeneous distribution of information and communication technologies, achieve greater participation in the contents of information and knowledge transmitted over digital networks, counteract the stronger concentration of power that the rapid integration into information networks places in the hands of industrialized countries and transnational companies and obtain greater international cooperation.

12.   All these issues are dealt with in the framework of ECLAC proposals in favour of improving consumer protection, strengthening competition and developing synergies and externalities within the productive apparatus, which was approved by the member States in Mexico City during the most recent ECLAC session, held in April 2000. The ECLAC Division of Production, Productivity and Management has as a central topic on its research and policy advice agenda science and technology issues, and it will continue to cooperate with Latin American Governments in the design and implementation of policy actions in this field in the years ahead.

13.   Members of the Board note with appreciation the policy of the Inter-American Development Bank set out in paragraphs 40 and 41 of the report (A/56/370), which reflects the broad mandate of an international

financial institution in addressing the need of its member nations. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is already active within its mandate in supporting capacity-building in information technology, and is ready to share in the positive experiences of other organizations. However, Board members consider that the recommendation might be better addressed to other international financial institutions rather than the United Nations Development Group and the specialized agencies, the mandates of which are generally more restricted.

Recommendation 3: Latin American Economic System

"Pursuant to several General Assembly resolutions, in particular resolution 54/8 of 18 November 1999, United Nations system organizations active in Latin America and the Caribbean should intensify their cooperation with SELA's science and technology initiatives, especially in TCDC [technical cooperation among developing countries]."

14.   The members of the Board fully endorse this recommendation. In particular, as mentioned in paragraph 31 of the report, FAO is prepared to pursue cooperation with the Latin American Economic System in specific areas.

Recommendation 4: science and technology networks

"United Nations system organizations should assess the viability, benefits and experiences of the numerous science and technology networks in Latin America and the Caribbean, in order to identify possible areas for strengthening South-South cooperation, and for extending lessons learnt to other developing regions in line with the Declaration of the Group of 77 and China 2000 South Summit. Particular emphasis should be placed on linking the research programmes in universities and, other tertiary institutions to the priority economic and social needs of the population, and the best research programmes should be encouraged with funding from the public and private sectors."

15. Board members endorse the importance of science and technology networks in order to strengthen South-South cooperation. FAO notes with appreciation the mention of the substantial number of technical cooperation networks it supports, particularly through its regional office in Santiago. With respect to recommendations 3 and 4, the International Civil Aviation Organization, in the implementation of its technical cooperation projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, fosters, to the extent possible, the initiatives relating to technical cooperation among developing countries and South-South cooperation.

Recommendation 5: UNCTAD-supported science, technology and innovation policy reviews

"(*a*) UNCTAD should involve other relevant United Nations system organizations more fully in future STIP reviews, and the lead agency role could rotate among the participating organizations depending on the area of emphasis of each review.

"(*b*) Subject to the wishes of the Governments concerned, the STIP reviews should in future focus more sharply on the essential core of the national science and technology system.

"(*c*) The final review reports should be significantly simplified to make them user-friendly for policy makers, and a separate ten-page summary version of each report should be prepared for host Government officials and for the Commission on Science and Technology for Development."

16. While the Inspectors find that the science, technology and innovation policy reviews are thoroughly well-prepared, a number of suggestions for improvement are made, including using an inter-agency team, making sure that national and international experts work together instead of separately and making the reports more user-friendly by including a clear and short executive summary. These recommendations are fully supported by Board members.

Recommendation 6: environmental information exchange network

"UNEP should evaluate UNEP Net's current performance and diffusion in Latin America and the Caribbean to determine its continuing impact in the region and explore the possibility of extending the network to other developing regions as an interregional information exchange mechanism."

17. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has informally assessed the performance of the environmental information exchange network (UNEP Net) in line with the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit. As a result of this analysis, and responding to the rapidly changing needs of countries with regard to information technology (i.e., the shift away from hardware and network needs towards more substantive information needs), UNEP has developed the UNEP.Net programme. The new UNEP.Net follows on from UNEP Net and aims to deliver authoritative environmental information from a broad range of information and data providers committed to making their information freely available. The focus of UNEP.Net is to ensure that customized and targeted environmental information products are readily available and disseminated to policy and decision makers and practitioners, as well as to make sure that scientifically reliable and relevant information on the state of the environment is available to support the capacity of UNEP to conduct timely assessments of environmental conditions and issue early warning notices on environmental threats.

18. In accordance with the recommendation, the new UNEP.Net has been designed so that it is global in nature, while maintaining the focus on strong regional nodes and cooperative agreements (especially in Africa). The programme aims to develop and maintain, with partners, a global environmental assessment information system to serve global and regional assessment needs, including the development of methodologies and the integration of the networks of environmental information custodians.

Recommendation 7: biotechnology in Latin America and the Caribbean

"In view of the multiple potential benefits of biotechnology in the health, agricultural, mineral and other sectors, FAO, UNESCO [the

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], UNU [the United Nations University], WHO [the World Health Organization] and other relevant agencies should continue to monitor the practical results of biotechnology research and development institutions in the region. They should assist these institutions in (a) building synergies for the pursuit of clear-sighted objectives centred on UNU's Biotechnology Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNU/BIOLAC) in Caracas and the Plant Biotechnology Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (REDBIO); and (b) in the strengthening of their organization, management and resource mobilization capabilities."

19. Members of the Board fully support this recommendation. FAO notes that, as recommended, it will seek to assess, on a regular basis, the practical results achieved by the various regional networking activities it is associated with, in the normal process of formulation, appraisal and evaluation of all of its activities.

Recommendation 8: Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute

"(a) CFNI should consider the feasibility of developing a more cost-effective system of priorities and modalities for the execution of its programmes, for example by concentrating on fewer courses and other activities to be delivered or financed directly; outsourcing some courses to partner institutions under formal agreements; and focusing more intensely on the preparation of teaching and training materials and methodologies to promote the incorporation of nutrition courses in school curricula at various levels.

"(b) WHO/PAHO should assist CFNI in tapping extrabudgetary funding possibilities so as to enable the institute to modernize its information and printing technologies and realize more fully its South-South technical cooperation potential."

20. After having provided initial support to the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI) at its inception, over the years FAO has continued to cooperate with CFNI in various initiatives. For example, in 1999 CFNI hosted an FAO-organized subregional workshop on developing food-based dietary guidelines and nutrition education in the Caribbean, and a manual and training module on nutrition for small-scale food processors in the Caribbean was prepared jointly. While the Pan American Health Organization is well-placed to assist CFNI in raising funds, FAO would welcome such efforts, particularly to support work of interest to the subregion.

IV. Other comments

21. Although not a formal recommendation, paragraph 118 of the report sets the stage for the new coordinating structure and suggests that UNCTAD be relieved of its coordinating role. Paragraphs 120 to 125 discuss the tasks to be undertaken by the proposed new, distinct inter-secretariat body for science and technology. The Inspectors realized that implementation of this proposal would be conditional on the political will of member States. Such a proposal would, in the view of UNCTAD, diminish its role in science and technology. UNCTAD would recommend strengthening the existing support structure rather than creating a new structure solely for coordination.

22. Paragraphs 100 to 102 of the report address an FAO regional project, executed from 1988 to 1992, dealing with the prevention of land degradation in agricultural development. While the satisfactory results of this project are acknowledged in paragraph 101, the Inspectors remark on an alleged lack of attention to data on farm productivity increases and question the exclusion of personnel from the farming communities from training and demonstration workshops organized under the project. According to FAO, these findings are not corroborated by the positive appreciation made by the recipient countries themselves and the donor, as transpires in the various reviews of the project achievements undertaken in this period.

23. In paragraph 121, the Inspectors refer to bovine spongiform encephalopathy and foot-and-mouth diseases as further examples of cases that in their view would require additional "inter-secretariat structures". However, FAO notes that in the Americas there is already an intergovernmental organization dealing with the prevention, detection and control of such diseases, namely the Pan American Health Organization/World

Health Organization, which has two regional centres, the Pan American Foot-and-Mouth Disease Centre (PANAFTOSA) in Rio de Janeiro and the Pan American Institute for Food Protection and Zoonoses (INPPAZ) in Buenos Aires. There are many subregional organizations, such as the International Regional Organization for Plant and Animal Health (OIRSA) in San Salvador that are also active on this front. Furthermore, the Office International des Epizooties, based in Paris, with regional representation in Buenos Aires, provides for overall coordination across regions. Hence, while there appears to be no lack of intergovernmental structures in place, FAO suggests that what is needed is ensuring adequate resources for the existing organizations in order to increase their capacity to deal with such epidemics.