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REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
INTERREGIONAL CONSULTATION ON DEVELOPMENTAL
SOCIAL WELFARE POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES
JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Second regular session of 1989
REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Report on the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)" (A/44/206-E/1989/69).

* A/44/50/Rev.1.

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ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Secretary-General welcomes the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Report on the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)", which is the most recent in a series of reports undertaken by the Unit on the regional commissions and is timely, both in itself and in that series. In the view of the Secretary-General, the report, while succinct, places the situation of ESCWA in clear perspective. It also formulates a number of relevant recommendations following from the analysis provided. The Executive Secretary of ESCWA has informed the Secretary-General that he associates himself with the spirit of the report.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Section I. Introduction

2. The Secretary-General endorses the statement made in paragraph 3 of the report. Despite the region's homogeneity, co-operation within it is not far advanced. Moreover, various armed conflicts are having a serious negative impact on economic development efforts. Economic co-operation and development can constitute a potent force against political diversity; clearly an objective, technocratic body that strives to bolster that force does not stand alone: it is supported by the global organization of which it is part.

3. Within the United Nations, ESCWA is intended to be the main general economic and social development centre for the region. The Secretary-General shares the view of the Inspectors that Member States and organizations of the region could consider making use of that potential and strengthening it as a tool in their development. As stated in paragraph 51 of the report, ESCWA, like other regional commissions, is much more than a secretariat: it is, above all, a community of member States with a collective and common interest in seeing to the complete development, under United Nations auspices, of the region it supports. Helping ESCWA to achieve optimal effectiveness would facilitate its efforts, which would appear to possess considerable potential for a significant contribution towards the development of the region.

Section V. Co-operation and co-ordination with regional and international bodies

4. In paragraph 49 of the report, the Inspectors state that it is essential that both ESCWA and the Arab regional institutions participate at an early stage in the definition of priority programmes and projects and make an inventory of the available institutional resources and services to make that co-operation

meaningful. They also draw attention to the initiatives taken by the Executive Secretary of ESCWA to revitalize agreements between the Commission and Arab regional institutions. The Secretary-General expresses the hope that those initiatives will lead to an increasingly fruitful co-ordination of efforts among organizations sharing a common purpose.

Section VI. Resources: human and financial

5. In paragraph 52 of the report, the Inspectors draw attention to the capability of ESCWA to undertake project activities both for, and on behalf of, Governments of the region and express the conviction that its member States should avail themselves of that capability willingly and in a substantial way. The Secretary-General shares the view of the Inspectors: the absence of attempts by many member States to utilize the Commission in the manner suggested is noteworthy.

6. With reference to the last sentence of paragraph 52, it is worth pointing out the significance that even very modest project activities might have, if tried by member States. It would appear to be precisely the lack of manifest interest on the part of Governments in the region that is holding back the Governments of countries outside the region from contributing to the Commission's work. Tangible signs of interest by States members of the Commission could very well prove to have a catalytic effect and provide Governments with a valuable instrument of development, at a cost well-matched both in yield and by others.

7. With regard to human resources, there has been some improvement in the Commission's Professional staffing level since the cease-fire in the Gulf war. This is no doubt welcomed by the hard-pressed incumbents who have held on for so long. The diligent and critical effort exerted so far to engage staff of the same standard should, however, continue undiminished in order to fill the vacancies remaining. The related conclusions of the Inspectors in that regard thus continue to be relevant.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General, in the context of the high vacancy rate, should, in collaboration with ESCWA, as necessary:

(a) Provide special treatment to ESCWA in the context of budgetary restrictions brought about by the financial crisis and the implementation of recommendation 15 of the Group of 18 concerning staff reductions.

8. Neither ESCWA nor any other regional commission was exempted from the post reduction exercise. It should be noted, however, that in conformity with the request from the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination and the General Assembly concerning these commissions, the post reduction in ESCWA is below the overall reduction in the Secretariat.

(b) Ensure rapid and effective implementation of the directives of General Assembly resolution 39/243 to recruit staff from any member State of the Commission to meet the ESCWA secretariat's personnel requirements.

9. It can be unequivocally stated that the recruitment freeze imposed by the Secretary-General in March 1986 with all of its restrictions, coupled with the hardship status of ESCWA in the middle of a war zone, significantly contributed to its high rate of professional vacancies. Because of these uncertain conditions in the region, there was also a high rate of turnover, with some adverse effects on the Commission's work programme.

10. In February 1988, in order to assist ESCWA and other duty stations with vacancy rates in excess of 20 per cent, the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management authorized the filling of posts with short-term staff as an interim measure. In addition to permitting this temporary filling of posts with short-term personnel and granting a limited number of special post allowances to General Service staff temporarily performing professional functions in order to minimize negative effects on work programmes, it also became necessary to consider staff from any member State of the Commission, even among those who were over-represented throughout the secretariat. However, the restrictions imposed by the recruitment freeze did not improve the situation of other member States of the region that still remain unrepresented or under-represented. Although efforts continue to be made in order to attract qualified candidates from these member States, we are faced with continued lack of interest in their participating in national competitive examinations and in their applying for advertised vacancies. This has resulted in a lack of success in their achieving within-range status. It is also apparent that the Organization is not competitive with respect to salaries and conditions of service needed to attract high-calibre nationals from some of these countries. As has been stated by the General Assembly, the current overall review of this situation by the International Civil Service Commission is most welcome.

11. As of late, however, an increased spirit of co-operation between ESCWA and Headquarters, as well as a larger pool of applicants from a variety of Member States both within and outside the region as a result of the cease-fire in effect since August 1988, has been encouraging. For the period 1 May 1987 to 1 May 1989, 20 posts have been filled in ESCWA by external candidates from the following Member States:

ESCWA member States

1 Egypt
3 Iraq
4 Jordan
1 Lebanon
2 Syrian Arab Republic

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Other Member States

2 Federal Republic of Germany
1 Japan
2 Sudan
4 United States of America

9

It is felt that much has improved over the course of 1988 to date, as illustrated by the decline in the vacancy rate from nearly 30 per cent in December 1987 to just under 23 per cent as at 1 May 1989. Overtures will continue to be made to those member States who have heretofore regrettably met all such efforts with virtually no support.

(c) Take the opportunity of the Vacancy Management and Staff Redeployment Programme to enforce with greater resolve staff regulation 1.2, and establish a systematic rotation of staff so as to ensure that staff members have both Headquarters and field experience and to minimize discrimination against staff stationed at "hardship" duty stations.

12. With the introduction of the Vacancy Management and Staff Redeployment Programme in April 1987, it was hoped to achieve a more equitable and balanced means of filling posts. With regard to the movement of staff in and out of "hardship" duty stations, the results have not been as favourable as hoped. However, to date in ESCWA, there has been a total of 10 staff members successfully placed as a result of vacancy management, three of whom have moved from ESCWA to New York, Geneva and Santiago respectively. In November 1988, ST/AI/338/Add.5 introduced a variety of measures in order to facilitate mobility. These included the granting of assignments of up to three years' duration, special post allowances, enhanced assignment allowances and installation grants, and more preferable rates of post adjustment.

13. It is hoped that these incentives, together with a clearly defined Secretariat-wide rotation scheme - which is expected to be put into motion in 1990 - will help us to attain the equitable balance sought. With the advent of such a rotation policy, high vacancy rates at duty stations such as ESCWA will, it is hoped, become a thing of the past.

(d) Establish and promulgate a single Organization-wide formula which can be used for the calculation of each organizational entity's vacancy rate, thus bringing to an end the confusion which surrounds the use of the vacancy rate both at the policy and operational levels.

14. The Secretary-General shares the concern expressed in recommendation 3 (d) of the report. An establishment committee, which comprises both representatives of the Budget Division and the Office of Human Resources Management, has been set up to deal with matters relating to organizational structure, job design and classification in each organizational entity. The Committee will be instructed to work out an Organization-wide formula that can be used for the calculation of the vacancy rate, as proposed by the Inspectors.
