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QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

JOINT INSPECTIONS UNIT

Publications policy and practice in the United Nations system

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative  
and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee has considered the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on publications policy and practice in the United Nations system (A/39/239) and the related comments of the Secretary-General (A/39/239/Add.1 and Corr.1). The Committee also had before it the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (A/39/239/Add.2, annex).
2. As mentioned in the JIU report, publications are and will continue to be an important part of the activities of the United Nations system. The Advisory Committee therefore welcomes the report of the JIU as well as the detailed comments of the Secretary-General and the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination thereon. In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes that the general reaction of organizations of the system to the report has been positive and that a number of the recommendations contained therein have been or are being implemented.
3. The report of the JIU contains six main recommendations, each of which encompasses a number of supporting recommendations. During its consideration of the report and the Secretary-General's comments thereon, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General who provided additional information regarding both the implementation of some of the recommendations and the difficulties in implementing others.
4. While the Advisory Committee has limited its comments to selected recommendations, as outlined below, it is of the opinion that the medium-term plan for the period 1984-1989, contained in document A/37/6/Add.2, should form the background against which the implementation of any of these recommendations should take place.

Recommendation 1: The approach to sales and free distribution

Recommendation 1.1:

Organizations must make every effort to gauge the extent to which publications they distribute free are having a positive impact on their readers.

5. In paragraph 5 of his comments (A/39/239/Add.1 and Corr.1), the Secretary-General states that recipients of free United Nations publications "could be specifically canvassed on their reaction to certain publications, if the General Assembly so decides". In the opinion of the Advisory Committee, a decision of the General Assembly is not a prerequisite for such surveys; rather, the Secretary-General should periodically canvas recipients of publications in different substantive areas and submit the results to the relevant intergovernmental bodies.

Recommendation 1.2:

At the same time a more positive approach to sales is necessary, which would make organizations more alive to the need to produce publishable and marketable material.

6. In paragraph 7 of his comments, the Secretary-General discusses the benefits which would be derived from the addition of two or three sales officers and notes that "the addition of staff might be considered in co-operation with the specialized agencies, so that sales officers could cover key cities on a regular basis for the entire United Nations system ...". The Advisory Committee recommends that this approach be considered further through the machinery of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination.

Recommendation 1.3:

A publications programme must have coherence and reflect the organizations' mandates. Publications boards/committees should satisfy themselves that proposed programmes do not leave uncovered any category of readership of subject matter.

7. As indicated in paragraph 13 of the Secretary-General's comments, before a departmental budget submission is sent to the Programme Planning and Budgeting Board, its publication component is reviewed from a technical and financial point of view by the Working Committees of the Publications Board. In the opinion of the Secretary-General, the programme relevance and coherence of a publications programme should also be tested at the pre-budget stage; however, the Advisory Committee was informed that this is not yet being done within the Secretariat.

8. The Advisory Committee agrees that this function should be more fully developed within the Secretariat. At the same time, however, the Committee believes that the question of the relevancy and appropriateness of recurrent publications should, in the first instance, be considered by the relevant intergovernmental organ at the time its programme of work, which forms the basis for the subsequent programme budget, is being examined. At that time the results of the surveys referred to in paragraph 5 above should be brought specifically to the attention of the intergovernmental bodies concerned.

Recommendation 1.4:

Governing bodies should require their publications boards/committees, before approval of any publication, to require information on the readership to which it is directed and on the proposed marketing concept and sales plan.

9. The implementation of this recommendation appears feasible in the United Nations, as indicated in paragraphs 14 and 15 of the Secretary-General's comments. However, given the emphasis placed by the United Nations on the widest possible dissemination of information, the Advisory Committee notes that information on the marketing concept and sales plan for each publication may not be a determining factor in the decision to approve a given publication.

Recommendation 1.6:

Governing bodies should, at intervals of two to three years, test the validity of the grounds for issuance of publications to ensure that they are meeting the test of publishability. The reviews should be based on information provided by the Secretariat on the extent to which the intended readers were reached and the proportion of printed copies that were distributed free or sold.

10. In commenting on this recommendation (paragraphs 17 to 19), the Secretary-General points out that no general policy has been established regarding the proportion of copies that should be distributed free in relation to those that should be sold. As mentioned in paragraph 19 of the Secretary-General's comments, up to now greater emphasis has been placed on advantages to the United Nations in terms of greater public awareness of its work and on practical assistance to Member States than on the prospect of sales revenue. While it agrees with this approach, the Advisory Committee also believes that governing bodies should review the publications programme from time to time and in so doing be provided with the information outlined in the recommendation.

Recommendation 1.9:

Distribution lists should be consolidated and computerized to facilitate their use, to eliminate duplication, to permit easier collaboration among organizations and to assist in planning and rationalizing distribution methods.

11. In paragraph 27 of his comments, the Secretary-General indicates that distribution lists are being computerized, notably at the United Nations offices at Geneva and New York, while a computer-based system has already been implemented at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). The Advisory Committee notes that the computerization and consolidation of distribution lists will also facilitate the surveys of recipients referred to in paragraph 5 above in respect of recommendation 1.1.

Recommendation 1.10:

More should be done to encourage sales in the developing world, not only because of the financial returns to be expected but also because of the universality of the United Nations system.

12. In discussing this recommendation, the Secretary-General points out in paragraph 30 that the United Nations relies primarily on free distribution to reach its targeted users in developing countries. On the other hand, the

Secretary-General also concedes that, in the light of the experience of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), sales to developing countries may be improved upon and that "the pricing policy for United Nations publications should perhaps be reviewed with a view to rationalization in general and to finding ways to enhance sales in the developing world in particular" (para. 34). In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes that the present formula used in determining prices "results in some prices being too high ... and some too low ... to be attractive material for handling by United Nations sales agents" (para. 34). Furthermore, the Advisory Committee was informed that most publications are now produced internally at comparatively low costs. In addition, sales revenue increased substantially in 1982-1983 and it is hoped that this improved performance will be continued in 1984-1985. In the light of these facts, the Advisory Committee is of the view that the Secretary-General should undertake a review of the pricing policy of publications with a view to formulating a more realistic pricing formula aimed at enhancing sales throughout the world.

Recommendation 2: Quality control and the role of the director of publications

Recommendation 2.2:

The role of the director of publications should be re-examined; he should have the authority to ensure that material being published meets standards of acceptability (or publishability) in the light of the readerships to which it is addressed.

13. In paragraph 39 of his comments, the Secretary-General states "that there is no existing function at the United Nations equivalent to the role envisaged by the Inspectors for the director of publications" and that, given the wide range of subjects dealt with by the Organization as well as its geographically and organizationally decentralized structure, this would not appear to be a viable proposal. Rather, the Secretary-General proposes in paragraph 40 that the function proposed for the director of publications be decentralized and carried out by publications committees or their equivalents in author departments. The Advisory Committee notes that sub-committees already exist at ECLAC, UNIDO and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and concurs in the Secretary-General's suggestion to set up similar committees in other main office locations and large author departments.

Recommendation 2.4:

Departments or units seeking permission to produce publications should be required to state and justify a specific period of time within which each publication must be produced and distributed or sold.

14. In paragraphs 45 and 46, the Secretary-General discusses the phases involved in producing a publication and notes that "without spending enormous sums on contractual printing, it is difficult to know how to remedy the situation of publications having to wait until a lull in meeting requirements makes possible their production in internal facilities" (para. 46). In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes that the Secretary-General is currently conducting a survey requested by the Committee on Conferences to ascertain the length of time required to produce recurrent publications of the Organization.

Recommendation 3: Management information

Recommendation 3.1:

It is essential that statistical and other information on the direct and indirect costs of publications and on the effectiveness of publication activities should be available.

15. Although the Secretary-General has questioned the Inspectors' estimate in respect of the direct costs of publications (see para. 66 of the Secretary-General's comments), the fact remains that the cost of publications must be taken into account by all concerned at all stages of planning. Consequently, the Advisory Committee concurs with the JIU that statistical and other information on the costs of publications should be made available. It also welcomes the Secretary-General's statement in paragraph 65 that the computerization of operations in the Reproduction, Printing and Distribution Sections, which will be introduced in late 1984, should result in a more efficient means of storing and organizing data, including cost information. According to the Secretary-General, "access to such information will facilitate planning and monitoring of costs and should enhance efficiency in the printing of publications and the overall production of documentation" (para. 65).

Recommendation 4: Reductions in the quantity of published material  
(redistribution of publications resources)

Recommendation 4.3:

Governing bodies should encourage organizations to collaborate with one another, in small combinations if necessary, for specific activities in marketing, promotion and distribution.

16. The Advisory Committee concurs with the Secretary-General that increased co-operation among the bookstores of the specialized agencies, the regional commissions and the information centres needs to be pursued. It also agrees that this recommendation should be referred for discussion to the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications, along with the topics under recommendation 5 (co-operation and consultation among organizations).

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