

ACC SUB-COMMITTEE ON STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES

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Delivery of Regional Advisory Services on
Population Matters in the ESCAP Region:
Implications of Recent Changes in the Policies
of the United Nations Population Fund
Relating to Agency Support Costs

Report prepared by the Economic and Social Commission
for Asia and the Pacific

Introduction

1. Following the decision of the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1990 on support cost arrangements, it was proposed by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that from the 1992-1995 budget cycle, the intercountry programme for technical assistance would have two main components: (a) a UNFPA-funded programme of research, training and information activities; and (b) a multidisciplinary team approach to back up UNFPA-funded country programmes. Each of these teams would be headed by a newly-created post of team leader appointed by UNFPA and the members would be mostly drawn from the existing pool of UNFPA-funded advisers working in various specialized agencies and the regional commissions.

2. In June 1991, at the thirty-eighth session of the UNDP Governing Council, UNFPA reported that a consensus had been reached with the specialized agencies (FAO, ILO, UNESCO and WHO) on its proposal on support cost successor arrangements, while discussions were continuing with the United Nations. At that session the Governing Council adopted decision 91/37 concerning UNFPA successor support cost arrangements. The decision, inter alia, specified the objectives of the arrangement and endorsed the principle of the team approach. It stressed the desirability of cooperation with existing regional mechanisms. It also took note of the United Nations decision to participate fully in the successor support cost arrangements, involving Technical Support Teams (TSS), effective 1 January 1993, and noted that for the United Nations arrangements would continue during 1992 on the same basis as in previous years.

3. This paper provides some background information on the regional advisory services on population matters at ESCAP, and discusses possible implications for the delivery of technical assistance to the developing countries of the region.

Regional advisory services on population matters

4. The regional advisory service on population matters was established at ESCAP in 1969 with funding from UNFPA. During the 1988-1991 funding cycle of UNFPA, regional advisory services were available to the countries of the region in the following five fields:

- (i) Population Censuses and Surveys;
- (ii) Data Preparation and Processing of Population Censuses and Surveys;
- (iii) Population and Development;
- (iv) Population Policies;
- (v) Population Statistics.

For 1992, UNFPA has allocated salary funds for the first four positions, while the post of Regional Adviser on Population Statistics is currently vacant. Recently UNFPA also decided to add a post on family planning/maternal and child health/management information systems to the team of advisers.

5. The regional advisory team has established itself as a principal means of enhancing national capabilities in a number of population-related areas. The advisory services have remained in great demand throughout the 1980s and the very high level of country requests has continued in the 1990s. For example, during 1984-1987 the two advisers in demographic statistics undertook 98 missions and during the 1988-1991 funding cycle, 194 missions were undertaken by five advisers. In addition to assisting individual countries, the advisers also served as resource persons at various regional meetings, workshops and training courses.

6. The thrust of the advisory service, which has frequently been commended by the ESCAP Commission, has been to respond to the requests of the governments in the Asia-Pacific region for guidance and support in various population-related areas. The services have thus been demand-driven by the governments themselves. They have been provided irrespective of the presence of a UNFPA country programme, although a very high proportion of missions involved assistance to such programmes. In instances where UNFPA country projects did not exist, the missions frequently led to their formulation.

7. In order to assist countries, the advisory team draws not only on its multidisciplinary technical skills and knowledge, but also on the close links of ESCAP with national institutions; with various relevant entities of the United Nations, such as the Statistical Office, UNDP and UNFPA field offices; with specialized agencies; and with governmental and non-governmental organizations, national population institutions, universities and the donor and other agencies of the developed countries. This integration of the advisory services with other intercountry and bilateral activities has enabled ESCAP to implement a very effective programme. For example, in the field of statistics a number of reviews of national statistical services have been conducted in which the UNFPA-funded advisers have played an important role, along with other ESCAP experts and advisers on national accounts, public finance, and statistical organization. Joint activities organized with the South Pacific Commission, ILO, and SIAP have often

received very useful inputs from the regional advisers for the development, dissemination and implementation of innovative ideas and the latest methodologies.

Situation in 1992

8. Based on the understanding that the United Nations will join the TSS arrangements in 1993, ESCAP had hoped to continue to provide technical assistance through advisory services in 1992 in the same manner as in the past. The secretariat therefore continued to entertain requests from governments for advisory assistance, many of which were follow-ups to earlier missions to support ongoing country activities. However, beginning in 1992 some new elements have been introduced which are undermining the effectiveness of the advisory services as compared to previous years. One immediate effect has been the loss of flexibility in scheduling advisory missions due to drastic cuts in the funding for the travel of the regional advisers: from \$US118,000 in 1991 to \$US20,000 in 1992, to be shared by five advisory posts. Over the past years the generous funding of UNFPA to the intercountry project on regional advisory services enabled ESCAP to meet government requests for technical assistance in a very effective manner. The requests could be prioritized and missions scheduled according to the nature of assistance required, desired timing and the level of development of the requesting country. However, the limitation on travel funds for 1992 has made it almost impossible to programme realistic schedules of missions for the advisers.

9. Instead of providing the needed travel funds directly to ESCAP, a new system has been devised by UNFPA whereby the mission costs of the advisers will be charged to the respective country projects. This new system, which should only have been introduced in 1993 as far as the United Nations is concerned, has already encountered some problems due inter alia to the lack of information in countries and UNFPA field offices alike on the newly introduced procedures. It appears as though such funds will generally not be available to ESCAP, as indeed was envisaged by the Governing Council decision. The new system makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the regional advisers to meet requests on population matters from member countries which do not have a UNFPA project.

10. With this loss in flexibility, the regional advisory service on population matters is turning into a team able to support a relatively narrow range of activities which are largely determined by the donor, UNFPA. Consequently, the number of pending requests for technical assistance is growing. In many cases, the requests have been postponed, in the hope that some arrangements could be made to meet them in the future. However, several others may need to be cancelled altogether. The expectations of member countries for advisory services from ESCAP cannot therefore be met, despite our best efforts to work within the limitations imposed.

Arrangements after 1992

11. Once they join the team, the advisers, although contractually with ESCAP, will be working under the respective team leaders appointed by UNFPA. Although UNFPA has stated that technical assistance will be provided to developing countries at the request of Governments, actual mission schedules of the advisers are to be determined by their team leaders according to plans drawn up for each country by the respective UNFPA Country Director. Thus the previous

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characteristic of the ESCAP regional advisory service, of being demand-driven on the request of governments, will be radically altered.

12. Compared to the cost of the existing arrangements, the financial implications of the new TSS arrangements, which include the creation of high-level team leader posts to be appointed by UNFPA, clearly cannot be known accurately in advance. As has already been noted, however, the cost of advisory missions from ESCAP advisers, or for that matter any advisers within the TSS teams, will henceforth be a direct charge against the country projects concerned, rather than against an intercountry fund as in the present arrangements. As indicated previously, advisory services will not be available to countries without UNFPA projects; where there are such projects but not in the specific field in which population-related technical assistance is sought, the decision on the rendering of advice will apparently be taken by UNFPA.

13. A further matter which would appear to be of concern to countries relates to the subregional pattern on which the "regional" advisory services will be delivered. Whereas ESCAP advisers currently cover the entire Asia-Pacific region, the forthcoming TSS arrangements will create three teams:

- for the Pacific, based at Suva;
- for South Asia, based at Kathmandu;
- for South-East Asia, based at Bangkok.

14. However the advisers are distributed among the subregions, there will presumably be very significant gaps in the statistical expertise available to many of the developing countries of the region - since, as can be seen from paragraph 4, the skills in the various disciplines represented in the current ESCAP team are by no means interchangeable. For example, if the data processing adviser remains in Bangkok, neither South Asian nor Pacific countries will be able to utilize his services. Moreover, there would appear to be significant advantages in retaining a critical mass of advisers in Bangkok, where they can continue to interact with each other as well as with other Professional staff in the population and statistics fields.

15. The issues mentioned in this paper are being brought to the attention of the countries of the region at the forthcoming session of the ESCAP Commission at Beijing, 14-23 April.

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