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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on initial guidelines for internal evaluation systems
of the United Nations organizations

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Initial guidelines for internal evaluation systems of the United Nations organizations" (A/34/271).

Annex

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

I. GENERAL REMARKS

1. The report proposes a comprehensive set of considerations and choices for adoption as a common framework integrating the diverse practices described in the Joint Inspection Unit's previous report on the history, nature and status of evaluation efforts in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/77/1). 1/ A related report of the Joint Inspection Unit, providing a glossary of evaluation terms (JIU/REP/78/5) 2/ has been commented on separately (A/34/286/Add.1). The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on medium-term planning in the United Nations (JIU/RE/79/5) 3/ is also related to the present report, since both deal with such issues as the specification of objectives and the formulation of achievement indicators.

2. These initial guidelines constitute, in the opinion of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC), a valuable step in the development of a common approach to evaluation which, by stressing common ground among the organizations of the United Nations system and while preserving the necessary degree of flexibility, should pave the way for further advances in this area. As experience is gained in the application of these guidelines, they will no doubt be progressively developed and refined, but ACC greatly appreciates this helpful report, which affords a sound realistic basis for the development of common evaluation practices.

3. As stated in paragraph 8 of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, these initial guidelines have two main objectives:

(a) "To stimulate thinking";

(b) To provide "a broad common guidance framework to be applied flexibly and pragmatically to the many diverse evaluation situations which United Nations Organizations face".

4. There is no doubt that this very interesting and useful report will stimulate thinking in all organizations of the system which are currently engaged in various kinds of evaluation of their activities. The main body of the report, as well as annex I, which provides a checklist of questions to be posed when evaluating, will be used extensively as a reference document.

1/ Circulated to members of the Economic and Social Council under the symbol E/6003.

2/ Circulated to members of the General Assembly under the symbol A/34/286.

3/ Circulated to members of the General Assembly under the symbol A/34/84.

5. The report defines purposes and desirable characteristics of evaluations with which ACC is in general agreement. It also stresses that a programme can be evaluated with success only if evaluation is built in the programme design both in terms of procedure and substance. ACC is in full agreement with this proposition.

6. The report selects, for use in United Nations organizations what is called "modest methodologies". At the same time, it recognizes that the desirable criteria for the definition of objectives and indicators are not easy to meet and offers six progressive levels for evaluation. In this respect, ACC is in full agreement with the statement that many problems and constraints prevent full use in the United Nations system of the more sophisticated methodologies and that in most cases the "ideal" or "desirable" evaluation may not be possible in the immediate future. The guidance given on how to select appropriate methodologies and how to assess them will prove most valuable to evaluation units and teams throughout the system.

7. The Joint Inspection Unit is engaged in two other activities that contribute to the furthering of a common understanding and the development of more useful evaluation methodologies:

(a) The Unit has arranged informal meetings of staff members engaged in evaluation at which the experience of the different organizations and their solutions to common difficulties is shared and conceptions of evaluation discussed. Two such meetings have been held and their periodic continuance will facilitate and consolidate progress and agreement on principles in this area.

(b) The Unit is also engaging in external evaluations of programmes. The first evaluation by the Unit, of the public administration and finance programme in the United Nations (A/33/227), was discussed by the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its eighteenth session. In addition to the value of its substantive investigation and conclusions, the report proved useful as an example and model of applied methodology. Several of its features were utilized in the subsequent internal evaluations of the transnational corporations programme (E/AC.51/98 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and 2) in the United Nations. In this connexion, although the guidelines in the report under review are for "internal" evaluation systems of United Nations organizations, it is felt that most of the considerations and principles are also valid for external evaluation.

8. In both of these activities, the Joint Inspection Unit is facilitating the identification and spread of "best practice" techniques, as well as helping to define common denominators. These approaches are, of course, complementary. At this stage in the development of evaluation in the United Nations system, when common denominators must necessarily be quite general, the spread of whatever techniques prove useful in actual evaluations is a most valuable contribution by the Unit.

9. In addition to the practices of the organizations of the United Nations system, it may be useful to take account also of the lessons to be drawn from experience gained elsewhere.

II. COMMENTS

10. As stated in paragraph 4 above, the formulation of virtually all considerations and choices in the text of the report by the Joint Inspection Unit appears satisfactory to most agencies of the system. There are, however, a few points on which ACC wishes to comment.

A. Coverage

11. In discussing evaluation coverage, the report provides, in paragraph 32, a useful list of criteria for selecting activities for evaluation. These include activities being considered for substantial reorganization, those whose cost-effectiveness is uncertain and other categories. It might be useful to add one category to this list: activities that are perceived to be successful. Here the purpose of the evaluation would not be primarily to uncover problems (although these should not be neglected if found), but to understand (two) things:

(a) The reasons for success, so that these can be emulated where possible;

(b) The nature of the success and, in particular, its limitations, so that programme managers can learn to formulate objectives for less successful areas that are realistic and therefore truly demanding.

B. Plan for organizational coverage

12. The report states, in paragraph 29, that internal evaluation efforts should be "guided by a well-thought-out plan of organizational coverage". In several agencies, medium- or long-term plans for evaluation exercises have already been drawn up covering, over a period of time, all the activities of the agency. In some organizations, such evaluations are carried out on a continuing basis by the governing organs. In still other organizations, the competent intergovernmental organs did not feel that a formal plan of coverage was needed. In the United Nations, for instance, it has been the practice of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination to specify two or three programmes to be evaluated one or two years in advance and this slight but precise planning has proved adequate.

C. Objectives

13. Regarding the statement in paragraph 40 that the "clarity of objectives" analysed along criteria in paragraph 39 "is not easy to achieve", ACC wishes to elaborate further. The first criterion is that objectives "should clearly state the specific situation in which the objective is to be obtained (baseline condition)." Almost all activities of United Nations organizations that are not technical co-operation country projects are designed to benefit many countries and so will have to work their effects in many different contexts. Under these circumstances, the notion of a "specific situation on which the objective is to be obtained" may not apply to certain types of programmes. Instances where applicability is doubtful are activities in support of multilateral negotiations

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and studies and surveys of global, political, economic and social problems and/or policies. This is equally true of the second criterion. A world-wide programme aimed at policy formulation may have to adapt to different priorities in different regions or countries. In effect, the fifth criterion mentions this problem and poses the challenge of "keeping statements of objectives as clear and simple as possible" while "taking account of multiple and potentially conflicting objectives". This is a formidable challenge, indeed, with which programme designers in the United Nations system are confronted and which can be solved only with the help of policy-making organs.

D. "Ongoing" versus "ex-post" evaluation

14. In paragraphs 70 and 71 of the report, reference is made to the possibility of conducting evaluation during the implementation of activities ("ongoing" evaluation) and after completion of an activity ("ex-post" evaluation). The same distinction is made in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on a glossary of evaluation terms (A/34/286). The issue is fully discussed in the comments of ACC on the latter report (A/34/286/Add.1).

III. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

15. The recommendation in paragraph 84 of the report proposes the adoption of "these guidelines as the initial guidelines for internal evaluation activities in the United Nations system". In the light of paragraph 8, which states that "these guidelines are ... not intended as a rigid set of instructions" and that they are "to be applied flexibly and pragmatically to the many diverse evaluation situations", ACC accepts this recommendation.

16. In the same paragraph, the Joint Inspection Unit proposes the initiation of periodic reviews of those guidelines. ACC feels that such reviews would indeed be quite useful, provided a sufficient length of time elapses between each review so as to allow for the lessons of experience to be available.

17. In paragraph 85, the Joint Inspection Unit recommends that each organization of the United Nations system "report at an early date to its executive or governing body" on 12 items relating to evaluation activities listed in paragraph 86. While several organizations of the system have already undertaken to report to their respective appropriate intergovernmental organ on internal evaluation activities, those reports may not fully comprehend, at least at the initial stage, all the 12 items of procedure and methodology listed in the table in paragraph 86. At the same time, it should be noted that in other organizations there are intergovernmental reviews of evaluation reports and these reviews cover many of the aspects of evaluation listed in the table. In some organizations, there are already reporting requirements in other contexts, often in response to related reports of the Joint Inspection Unit, on planning and programming, the improvement of objectives, the use of indicators and, less directly, on many of the other items in the table. In the latter case, it is felt that the recommendation in paragraph 85

is adequately taken care of by these reporting requirements. In addition, the pursuit of informal consultations with agency staff engaged in evaluation, which was initiated by the Joint Inspection Unit, could well help refine further the process while reducing the need for frequent reporting.

18. Although these initial guidelines are directed to internal evaluation systems of United Nations organizations, they may also lend themselves to use by Governments in their own evaluation of programmes and projects which benefit from technical co-operation by United Nations organizations. Active national participation in evaluation at the country level would seem essential in order to safeguard full government involvement in and control of technical co-operation activities to which the contribution of United Nations organizations in the majority of cases is only of limited scope.