



REPORT

on

Selected Ideas for Improving Field Operations

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## A. Introduction

1. Before discussing specific problems and issues faced by developing countries in expanding their capacity for development, and the role of UN technical assistance in helping to overcome these difficulties, I would like to make some broad observations.
2. There are continuing opportunities to assist the governments of developing countries to improve their overall economic planning and programming. Such improvements should not only strengthen the countries' development efforts, but provide a sounder basis for identifying priority areas for UN technical assistance. This report, however, is restricted to considering ways and means of strengthening UN technical assistance activities after the priority areas for UN projects have been established by the government, primarily because matters such as "comprehensive country or joint programming," "country strategy," etc., will undoubtedly be explored in depth in the report of the Capacity Study Group. This report is also restricted to country projects (as opposed to regional or inter-regional projects). It is based on case studies in the field supplemented by extensive discussions at all of the various agency headquarters.
3. The design and preparation of a UN technical assistance project and its subsequent implementation involves both a UN executing agency and the country's technical ministry that has been designated as its executing agency for that project. The attitude of the UNDP Resident Representative's Office and the government's planning ministry toward a given project proposal may have had some influence on its design, but in the final analysis the efficiency and effectiveness with which a given project is developed and implemented depends almost wholly on how well equipped these two executing agencies are to carry out such activities.

4. It is my observation that the various UN executing agencies have not been very effective in helping technical ministries of developing countries to strengthen their capabilities to plan and carry out technical assistance activities. Much more can be done to help these ministries to mobilize their internal resources in order to share fully in the task of planning and implementing technical assistance projects, and thereby to expand their capabilities to eventually run their own show without outside assistance. The UN expert continues to draft nearly all project proposals and operating plans by himself instead of working with local experts as a team, and in many, perhaps most, cases to implement the projects with a minimum of counterpart training. This is not the way to help a developing country to become truly independent and self-reliant. It is my view that this situation will continue until real progress is made in strengthening the technical ministry as an institution to plan and control its own programmes and its foreign assistance projects. This is the key bottleneck in really coming to grips with the problems discussed later in this report.

5. In the field I have noted a strong propensity for many UN experts to try to maximize the number of graduates, the amount of research completed, etc., by their own efforts during the life of a project, rather than to focus primarily on building strong institutions to carry on after they leave. When they eventually go home, they may have left little or nothing behind to carry on what they have started.

6. Later in this report I attempt to analyze in detail some of the principal ingredients of institution building with respect to UN projects. If the UN agencies are going to make further important progress in helping on these matters, it will of course have to be on a co-operative basis with the executing ministries. However, as pointed out above, the UN should be

more helpful to technical ministries in training their staff and developing better organizational arrangements to plan and co-ordinate their activities including technical assistance projects. What is needed is additional institution building within the technical ministries themselves, which will eventually open the door to such improvements as joint preparation of project requests and work programmes, a decrease in the time required to clear names or to get a fellowship programme under way, the timely appointment of suitable counterparts, joint evaluation of projects, better mobilization of internal resources to support a given project, and so on.

7. In order to bring these observations into focus with specific things the UN family might do, I am presenting below a picture of the typical situation I have found in the field regarding planning and programming.

B. Planning and Control

8. Senior officials of the ministry with responsibility for development planning tend to take little interest in technical assistance except those Special Fund projects that may lead to large capital investments. Their ministry usually has a focal point for general co-ordination of technical assistance activities and approval of priorities. In other words, it is a place to react to and approve technical assistance projects prepared by others at the technical ministry level, primarily in terms of insuring that the local funds involved do not exceed amounts included in the budget, or that the foreign currencies requested are within totals probably available from external sources. It is normally not a place to initiate improvements in planning and control of individual projects.

9. More specifically, national plans and the planning agencies in developing countries are not oriented towards technical assistance, but towards capital investment. Development planners live in the world of GNP, balance of payments, capital output ratios, price levels, tax collections, external

debt burden, input-output studies to determine if a programme is internally consistent, politically-determined, and so on. Their long term plan is designed primarily to reflect the desired over-all growth rate of the country and priorities by major sectors, and the necessary capital inputs and rate of internal savings to achieve such goals and still keep the balance-of-payments situation and internal price levels under control. It is not usually designed to provide specific guidance for foreign technical assistance although it may have annexes by economic sectors containing some useful target data in terms of planned agricultural production, students graduated, miles of highways and the like, and perhaps even a list of technical assistance projects.

10. Last year I spent about three months each in two semi-developed countries that were reported to have sophisticated 5-year plans but I do not recall a single instance when a UN official or expert made any reference to the country's long-range plan, or had one in sight on his desk. It did not seem to be "relevant" to persons concerned with technical assistance activities.

11. In contrast to the "economic planner" described above, the "technical assistance planner" lives in a different world. He lives in the world of people: of education, training, fellowships, health clinics, research institutes, manpower studies, surveys of national resources and markets, transfers of technical knowhow, organisation and management, and the like. He understands the kinds of problems and issues discussed later in this report and can help solve them. Unfortunately, there are comparatively few trained technical assistance planners in developing countries. Where they exist, however, in organizational units attached to the head of technical ministries, the door is open to major improvements in the planning and control of UN projects as well as the overall ministry programme.

12. It is my firm conviction that unless the technical ministries can make some real headway in establishing and supporting units for programming

and control of their activities, there are a number of key weaknesses in UN supported technical assistance projects that we are just going to have to live with. At the same time, I recognize some major obstacles in moving in this direction, particularly in certain economic sectors.

13. The areas where it should be easiest to make headway are those sectors of the economy that are traditionally organized and run in all countries on a highly centralized basis by the central government. I have in mind particularly such activities as transportation and communications. There are usually people in the technical ministries concerned with such activities who are informed about planning and control of projects. It has been my observation that UN projects for such activities are subject to better programming and control than the average UN technical assistance project.

14. Certain other activities, notably agriculture, education and health, are often the basic responsibility of the separate states or provinces and it becomes unusually difficult to plan and operate projects under such circumstances. A good example is India. Some of the "old-timers" there among the foreign officials told me that their greatest single handicap in developing and carrying out technical assistance activities was the fact that basic responsibility for such activities resided in each individual State. I found a similar situation on a previous UN assignment in Nigeria. For example, until a few years ago Nigeria did not even have a Federal Ministry of Agriculture, and this ministry's role even today is comparatively small.

15. Another major obstacle is the lack of know-how regarding technical assistance planning and programming. Many volumes have been written on development planning, but the same is not true for technical assistance planning. I was told that when UNESCO established an institute for educational planning a few years ago, there was not a single book in existence on the subject worthy of the name. There is great concern these days about un-employment in developing countries, but where in the literature

on economics is there a good analysis of this subject? Five-year plans around the world very conveniently leave out this item in their equations. A very sophisticated industrial technology based on labour-saving through more intensive use of capital is available in all advanced countries; but where do you find more than isolated fragments of an industrial technology based on modern science which is designed for the vast majority of developing countries where labour is not the limiting factor, namely a technology based on capital-saving rather than labour-saving?

16. In spite of the obstacles, some limited progress is being made here and there in establishing focal points for planning and programming with qualified staff in the technical ministries of the central government. In some cases a start is being made by recruiting United Nations or bilateral experts for such purposes. I have seen this role filled by Europeans who were with the former colonial regime and stayed on. Country representatives of UN agencies who have an office right in the technical ministry can often help sell the idea of better planning and controls.

17. At least one UN agency is bringing employees of technical ministries of developing countries to its headquarters for training in this field. Other UN agencies have a practice of sending high-ranking officials to a developing country to prepare an over-all programme for a technical ministry extending over several years. In spite of these various commendable efforts, however, this task is still largely ahead of us.

18. The above analysis suggests to me that further substantial progress in better planning and implementation of technical assistance projects is going to be achieved primarily by separate initiatives by the UN agencies to help the technical ministries in their field strengthen their competence in such matters, not through more inter-agency meetings on co-ordination in New York and Europe. The situations found in the different countries no doubt will vary widely and some countries may not welcome initiatives by UN agencies in this direction.



19. More specifically, each UN agency should assign responsibility in its headquarters for helping technical assistance ministries to strengthen their capacity to plan and control their activities. Presumably, this help would normally be given by organizational units in headquarters established on a geographic basis. Continued close relationships with planning ministries is essential for achieving certain objectives, but is not an alternative to promotion of technical assistance planning and control of individual projects in technical ministries.

20. Although it may help in the long run, the above approach does not come to grips directly with the problems faced in implementing multi-disciplinary projects involving more than one UN agency. It is not only difficult to sort out relations between two or more UN agencies, but the problems involved in working with two or more ministries of the recipient country can become extremely frustrating. "Horizontal co-ordination" between ministries is difficult enough to achieve in very advanced countries, and is almost impossible to attain in some developing countries. The question can be raised as to whether the percentage of multi-disciplinary projects that have turned out well so far is high enough to be worth the effort; or whether it is better to break up such proposed projects into pieces, each involving only one agency and one ministry with the necessary informal co-ordination from the outside; or establish semi-autonomous corporations or institutions for such activities.

21. Outlined below are a number of very stubborn problems observed in the field and discussed at the various agency headquarters, nearly all of which would become more manageable and more subject to positive solutions if the executing ministry involved in the recipient country had an effective planning and control unit, with strong support from the minister's office.

C. Buildings

22. It is a common experience in the field to observe United Nations

projects housed in new buildings, even though there were other government buildings in acceptable localities that might have been used. Since perhaps the most fundamental objective of any UN technical assistance project should be to help the local government mobilize its internal resources for development, it would seem to make sense for UN officials during the preparatory stage of projects to co-operate with local officials in seeking facilities already in existence for a proposed new project in order to reduce local costs and maximize the effective use of local resources. It is recognized of course that there will be many projects for which there simply is no practical alternative but to build new structures or add on to present buildings.

23. It was encouraging to meet senior officials in several agency headquarters who had become very conscious of the need for more careful screening of building requirements for UN projects, and were promoting such a policy in their agencies.

D. Counterpart training and fellowships

24. UN officials face extremely difficult problems and issues in coming to grips with the counterpart training requirements of UN technical assistance and fellowships. For purposes of analysis they can be divided into five categories and summarized as follows:

(a) Attitude towards training

25. The usual "official" explanation of the basic task of UN technical assistance experts is to train their counterparts to take over their work and then go home; in other words, to work themselves out of a job. Descriptions of Regular TA and Special Fund projects usually indicate that they are designed to achieve that objective. In practice, however, this objective is not accepted by many, perhaps the majority of UN experts and their superiors. They take the position that the development of human resources, in other words the expansion of these countries' capacity for development, is a

long term proposition, and they expect the basic projects to be continued for the foreseeable future. They see nothing wrong with the fact that, although experts come and go, many of the basic Regular and TA projects (not Special Fund projects) even in semi-developed countries were started ten or fifteen years ago and are still almost automatically extended at each termination date. Most of these experts work as individuals and do not report on the status of training of counterparts (if any). A senior official in one large UN agency told me that there was not a single status report on the training of counterparts in the whole building. In another agency headquarters an official said they had such status reports, but when asked for samples he was unable to find any after a quick look at his files.

26. Agency headquarters officials take strong exception to the conclusion that Regular and TA projects are almost automatically extended at termination dates. They will describe in detail the committees that review all projects during the budget season to determine whether they should be extended. They point out that often the extension is in fact a different project, but the description of the project was not formally changed. An attempt was made to check this matter statistically through a review of the history of Regular and TA projects of several large agencies in selected countries, which disclosed that a substantial number of projects were regularly extended at their termination dates. Checks in the field in two semi-developed countries did suggest, however, that during the past year or two the decision as to whether Regular and TA projects should be extended was being given a closer look, particularly after the introduction of the new budgetary procedures on TA projects. It is also noted that initial project termination dates often prove to be unrealistic because of recruitment

difficulties with both local and international staff; but repeated extensions of termination dates call for some other explanation.

27. The pressures on agency headquarters to extend projects are formidable. Several of the larger UN agencies are faced today with substantial numbers of unemployed experts waiting for another assignment. Furthermore, those UN experts in the field who are not on leave of absence from a career position at home and who do not have alternative job opportunities in sight, lack an incentive to push hard on counterpart training and work themselves out of a job.

28. The attitude of governments is pertinent to the above analysis. Faced with a serious shortage of trained personnel, officials of developing countries cannot be blamed for looking upon the different forms of technical assistance as a way to get well trained people to fill jobs in their government at the lowest possible cost. However, I have noted a growing awareness that even UN personnel do cost the recipient government a considerable amount of money, and officials at the policy level are expressing interest in more careful screening of UN projects as more and more trained locals are available.

(b) Use of local resources

29. Observations in the field clearly indicate that designers of UN projects have concentrated on the mobilization of external training resources in the form of training abroad and bringing in outside experts, rather than concentrating on helping local officials mobilize their internal training resources and supplementing them with external resources only as needed. For example, there is much evidence that training of counterparts

is usually met by sending them abroad even though the country is semi-developed and has its own advanced educational centres and other training facilities. Conversations with many Special Fund project managers in the field indicated that fellowships listed in plans of operations usually are not screened to determine if at least part of the training requirements could be met locally; even if they could, there usually is no provision for financing such local training. In agency headquarters it was disappointing to find so few officials who seemed to be really concerned with helping particularly the semi-developed countries to mobilize the use of their expanding training resources and thus become more self-reliant.

(c) Training abroad

30. Officials in several agency headquarters stressed the importance of the fact that many persons from developing countries who are trained abroad are unable to make much use of their training when they return home because their superiors have not had a similar exposure to training in developed countries and resist change. It is also very frustrating to return home and find that you are not promoted any faster with the advanced training, nor do you receive any increase in salary; in fact, the period of training abroad may not even count towards seniority rights. These agency officials also point out that even if a trainee returns to a position in his government where he can make good use of his training abroad, all too often he accepts a position in a private company at a much higher salary if his training is also useful to industry. My observations in the field support the above, but the importance of these difficulties seemed to vary rather widely between UN agencies. Of concern also was the number of fellowships for too specialized or advanced training for which the trainee found little or no demand when he returned home.

(d) Training at the site

31. A number of Special Fund projects were visited in the field which had effective programmes to provide at the project site the necessary experience to counterparts to carry on after the expert left; and qualified counterparts were on the job. However, in perhaps the majority of cases, particularly for Regular and TA projects, the training of counterparts was unsatisfactory. The lack of counterparts for many projects is well known. It is also unfortunately true that when pressed to appoint counterparts, some developing country governments have adopted the policy of naming "professional" counterparts who will serve as counterparts over the years for various projects to fulfil the agreed provisions of the project, but in practice have very little to do with the experts involved. Even if a satisfactory counterpart is named, experience shows that it is often unrealistic to assume that an expert is a good teacher and well qualified to train counterparts. Finally, penetrating questions are being raised in the field regarding projects where training should be started a year or two in advance of the rest of the project work programme; and in the case of Special Fund projects, where it might be financed as a separate TA project. All of the above points were very well known to all agency headquarters personnel contacted, and have been debated for years.

32. In seeking ways and means to strengthen the effectiveness of UN agencies in on-site training, I feel that the following proposals have merit:

- (i) Generally avoid the project involving only one expert except for OPAS appointments or those cases where the expert's job is in fact to prepare a Special Fund proposal. I am unimpressed with the effectiveness of individual experts for institutional building .

or training generally.

(ii) Carefully evaluate technical assistance proposals, particularly in the least developed countries, in terms of whether they should be staffed with regular technical experts or OPAS-type appointments. I think we have often been frustrated by the lack of effective on-site training by conventional standards for a given project when a more careful study before project approval would have indicated that it was unrealistic to think of anything beyond an OPAS-type assignment at the country's present stage of development.

(iii) Speed up the timetable in moving from regular experts to only consultants or termination in semi-developed countries. During this past year I visited many examples of projects where the ministry wanted equipment and fellowships, but not advice. In such an environment on-site training is almost invariably unsatisfactory. I particularly remember chatting with a UN project manager at one site, and he said, "these fellows simply refuse to listen. They feel they have read the books, and refuse to take advantage of the experience we have to offer."

(iv) Give top priority to those project proposals where the local government has already established an institution, has attempted to operate it for sometime without outside help, and then calls on the UN for assistance in overcoming certain difficulties or raising its standards. The most difficulties appear to arise when the UN steps in and starts a project "from scratch" before the local officials have struggled with it alone. In such cases, the project becomes identified too much with the UN, and local officials do not feel a sufficient sense of responsibility for it.

(v) Adopt the network analysis discussed later in this report to improve the timing of on-site training. I

question whether any other approach will result in significant improvements.

(e) Training in least developed areas

33. In those countries or sectors of an economy where virtually no qualified counterparts are available, it would seem to make sense to recruit UN experts who would fill operational or executive positions as regular government employees during the transition period and thus help make it possible to release potential counterparts for necessary basic training. The UNDP has the OPAS programme to fill this need. I have observed a number of OPAS assignments in the field that worked out very well. However, in some cases this programme has been difficult to administer, particularly for senior positions. For example, UNESCO recruited a man to serve as Dean of an engineering school in an African country until a qualified local person was available. The UNESCO expert soon found himself in difficulties. He became involved in the selection of individuals for foreign fellowships among many candidates, a very delicate situation for a foreigner to cope with. He was necessarily concerned with the selection of persons to be admitted to the engineering school and inevitably became involved in tribal jealousies. He was concerned with the control of funds for the school, and became vulnerable to charges of corruption. In a situation such as described above, a local person could have been named the Dean and the UNESCO expert could in fact have run the school but be technically only an adviser to avoid direct involvement in the kinds of situations mentioned above; but experience shows that, in certain parts of the world, unless the UN expert assumes the full operational or executive responsibilities of a position, he probably will not be treated as a full member of the team and be given free access to that information necessary to carry out his duties. In other parts of the world, many governments do not favour the use of foreigners in operational posts, which helps



explain why two thirds of all recipient countries have not requested any OPAS experts.

34. At least one large UN agency has found it difficult to recruit persons directly for OPAS positions because they do not receive important "fringe benefits" such as membership in the UN pension fund and health insurance programme, and the status that goes with possession of a United Nations laissez-passer. These difficulties have been surmounted by recruitment as a regular expert and then detail to an OPAS position. Another alleged difficulty is that the recipient government has to pay the full local salary to a UN recruit for an OPAS post, whereas a regular expert usually involves less expense to the government. However, I am told that in most cases, the difference between the local salary and the  $12\frac{1}{2}\%$  of advisory salaries which governments must pay, is not significant.
35. In discussing experiences with OPAS assignments, I have been impressed with the very strong support this programme has in the headquarters of at least half of the specialized agencies. Although difficulties may be encountered at senior levels, as illustrated by the case example presented above, the agencies say they have many success stories. Before reaching firm conclusions on this matter, however, I think we need some further study of UN agency experiences in the least developed countries and areas.
36. For example, if a highly under-developed country has a number of OPAS assignments, what should be done concurrently about training? Should a scholarship programme be tied to all OPAS posts? Or should the UN sponsor local training facilities and provide experts to run them? Is it appropriate to have the conventional expert programme and a separate OPAS programme as at present; or would

it be better to have just one expert classification, but introduce that degree of flexibility necessary to tailor his duties and administrative relationship to the local situation, even to the point of eliminating all direct supervisory ties with the agency if considered appropriate? (This latter approach might help to open the door to the use of experts in operational and executive-type positions in those two thirds of recipient countries who have not requested any OPAS appointments up to the present time.) Is it better to concentrate on 2 or 3 large projects, or recruit persons for say ten key operational positions necessary to get certain high priority activities of ministries under way? What has been our recruitment experience? And so on?

#### Key Problems

37. After discussing the above matters with headquarters staff of several of the agencies, it was concluded that the most urgent problem is to figure out what should be the future role of the UN family in semi-developed countries, particularly with respect to Regular and TA projects. In at least some of these countries the need is declining for UN experts and for counter-part training, except for special situations; and there are indications here and there of a trend towards limiting expert help to short-term consultants. At the same time the demand for equipment seems to be stronger than ever.

38. The issue seems to be whether one can look forward to an accelerating trend towards termination of UN projects, particularly in the Regular and TA categories, in the semi-developed countries; or whether there are to be new kinds of assistance to these countries tailored to a situation where they have made good progress in training people, but are confronted with a serious long term balance-of-payments situation plus the prospect of increasing unemployment and rapid increases in population. Since a very substantial part of UNDP and Regular financed projects are in these semi-developed countries, the UN's future role there is of crucial importance in determining the future total demand for technical assistance.

39. It may be, for example, that in the future emphasis should be placed on helping these semi-developed countries to mobilize their expanding

training and other internal resources instead of focusing UN projects on mobilizing external resources as has been the tendency in the past. (This would involve a much more flexible Plan of Operations). More of the training could be concentrated on programmes designed to exploit technological breakthroughs and opportunities for labour-intensive capital investment. And so on.

40. Another urgent problem involves bringing the training aspects of UN projects under better control through some kind of "status" reports. Discussions in the field and at agency headquarters have highlighted the difficulties involved. At least most developing countries are not accustomed to preparing efficiency reports on individual government employees. If reports on the training progress of individuals were transmitted through usual channels to an agency headquarters, such information might get into the wrong hands and lead to embarrassing situations. For example, an official of one agency headquarters told me that some time ago they started to send some status reports on counterparts from the field to headquarters. A senior individual in one country heard that a rather critical report on himself had been sent in, and he made a special trip to this headquarters to complain about such treatment. It is understood that this incident played a large part in the agency's decision to discontinue such status reports.

41. In spite of the difficulties, however, an executing agency needs to know whether a local co-project manager of a UN project will probably be ready to take over the management of the project in one year or three years; whether trainees abroad are doing well in their studies and will return to the project within a given time to replace the experts after a suitable overlap period; whether approximately 2 per cent or 25 per cent of the fellowship holders failed to come back to their country after training, and what percentage are now working in the fields for which they were trained; what are the prospects for counterparts which have not been provided as agreed upon; if the counterpart is spending only part-time on the project what will happen when the UN expert eventually leaves; and so on. If the United Nations is to proceed in

an efficient way to help developing countries to learn to run their own show, and not serve primarily as a recruiting agency for foreign experts at low cost, then it would seem reasonable to expect such elementary information as suggested above to be available in convenient form and on a routine basis, not just when there is some sort of a crisis.

42. It has been observed in the field that the UN-supported projects where training activities are most successful typically are "country identified". In other words, these are projects which usually were started before a UN agency came into the picture to help, and are strongly identified with the government, not a UN agency. The senior local staff is usually above average in quality and strongly in favour of change, so that when a fellowship holder returns from training abroad he has an opportunity to make good use of his training with proper encouragement and support from his superiors. Also, because of its strong identity with the government and hence good prospects for a stable future, it is easier for the project to attract and hold good counterparts.

43. A senior official of one of the agencies told me a couple of years ago that after seventeen years in headquarters and the field, the one important lesson he learned was that the agency-supported projects that really turned out well were strongly country identified. He went on to describe a number of projects which were strongly identified with his agency or particularly with individual experts, which in the end were largely failures.

44. The very frustrating situation where a counterpart is trained on the job or abroad and then accepts a position elsewhere because of higher pay or other reasons is of great concern to certain UN agencies, but I feel that a special study of this problem would be necessary before any reliable conclusions could be reached. Also, I have nothing to add at this time to the view expressed by several officials of agency headquarters that the realistic answer to the frustrations encountered in implementing OPAS assign-

ments is "to be flexible".

E. Equipment and supplies

45. There is considerable evidence that in recent years executing agencies have taken an increasing interest in problems associated with equipment and supplies. Some of the matters that have come under closer scrutiny are as follows:

(a) Physical handling of imports

46. In the past there have been reports of mishandling of imports of equipment and supplies such as being left out on the docks for extended periods of time. While in India last fall I made a rather intensive examination of this whole matter, reviewing files, talking to the project managers of sixteen Special Fund projects about their experience in importing equipment, and visiting Bombay where most of the imports are received for forwarding to project sites. It became clear that these imports of equipment and supplies have been brought under good control, and the reporting systems to agency headquarters for verifying receipt of equipment are adequate. Later discussion about equipment at agency headquarters indicated that in general the physical handling aspects of the problem were under reasonable control, but I can only report positively about India where I had the benefit of first-hand observations.

(b) Rationale for equipment

47. The usual rationale for equipment in the past has been for "training purposes". In practice, however, the criterion has tended to be the foreign exchange costs of equipment required for a UN supported project, whether or not the equipment was only for training purposes. Observations particularly in semi-developed countries indicate that as the need for UN