



REPORT
ON COUNTRY PROGRAMMING AND AFTER

by

Leonard Scopes
Joint Inspection Unit

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Between 16 September and 21 November 1971, I carried out a tour of inspection in Algeria, Libya and Tunisia, devoting my attention primarily to the technical assistance operations of those members of the United Nations Development System which come within the purview of the Joint Inspection Unit. These three countries were selected in an attempt to meet suggestions commended to the attention of Inspectors at the twenty-fifth session of the General Assembly with a view to possible economies in reporting effort and costs of travel. For the following reasons it is doubtful whether the economy achieved was justified:

- (a) The economic, political and social circumstances of the three countries are different and it proved impossible to follow the suggestion that one single report covering all should be produced.
- (b) The proximity of North Africa to the large majority of agencies concerned with technical assistance attracts frequent visits by project controllers and others, on whose heels an Inspector finds himself continually treading, with the result that his observations are likely to lose their novelty for those to whom they are addressed.
- (c) The degree of encouragement of an Inspector's visit to field staff, to which attention has recently been encouragingly drawn, probably varies in inverse proportion to distance from Headquarters.
- (d) In fairness to those responsible for his arrangements, especially vis-à-vis national authorities, an Inspector tackling several countries in succession must put himself into the strait-jacket of a pre-arranged programme, which reduces the possibility of adapting his schedule to circumstances as he finds them, i.e., of making time his servant rather than his master.
- (e) In a developing situation, an Inspector might on occasion wish to get a timely word in to Headquarters as a matter of urgency, but in a multiple inspection the possibility of such action tends to be crowded out by the need to get oriented into the new frame of reference of a different country.

2. Informal comments arising from these visits have been sent direct to the executive heads of the specialized agencies and other bodies concerned, namely: the Office for Technical Co-operation of the United Nations; the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; the United Nations Industrial Development Organization; the International Labour Organization; the Food and Agriculture Organization; the World Food Programme; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; the World Health Organization; the International Telecommunications Union; the World Meteorological Organization; and the International Atomic Energy Agency. There remain, however, a few thoughts about the future of United Nations technical assistance after the crossing of the watershed that Country Programming represents which may be of more general interest and which are therefore set down formally, for wider distribution, in the following paragraphs. These ideas arise not only from the North African tour under immediate reference but also from three preceding years of inspection.

Country Programming

3. The first field contact with the procedure of drawing up a programme for dovetailing United Nations technical co-operation into a national development plan within the limitations of an indicative planning figure was encouraging and it seemed not unlikely that most of the advantages expected from the new system would indeed be realized. There is already an evident sharpening of priorities in national planning bodies and healthy pruning of projects of less direct relevance to national development plans, which will no doubt be followed by even closer scrutiny of future requirements when continuing operations now included in programmes come to an end. Central planning authorities contacted in two of the three countries visited were pleased at the prospect of working under the new system, with its promise of more rational planning and, above all, avoidance of the continual, frustrating and expensive task of processing hypothetical projects in order to fill up a "pipe-line" for possible selection and approval by the Governing Council of UNDP.

Harmonization with national planning cycles

4. One of the advantages expected from Country Programming was the possible synchronization of UN aid projects with the planning period of individual countries, i.e., the possibility of launching some five-year operations, for example, at the start of a five-year economic plan. It begins to look as though doubts expressed about the likelihood of achieving such co-ordination with any significant exactitude were justified. It seems that, in practice, external aid must always lag behind. Hopes have been expressed that association of UN planners with the national planning team from the very start of the planning operation might lead to better if not to absolute synchronization, but there are clearly going to be a number of countries which will regard economic planning as an act of sovereignty which it is desirable to keep in domestic hands until a certain stage of decision has been reached and passed. It has also been pointed out, very rightly, that premature programming is the antithesis of true planning. It is likely, therefore, that, under the new system, planning for individual UN projects will be able to start only when a Government has decided at what points of its plan UN aid can best be applied. Pre-project activities and similar devices will doubtless help, but there will continue to be delays in launching full UN action in the field and the last stages of many operations will almost inevitably overlap, sometimes by a considerable margin, the start of a new Plan and therefore possibly end in an atmosphere of less enthusiasm than that in which they began, because of the advent of new ideas and possibly new men. For these reasons, some officials connected with the administration of UN assistance are beginning to think that education and training - fields in which continuity is more important than the observance of deadlines - are perhaps among those activities most naturally suited to UN assistance. The long-term aim of such projects, their catalytic nature and their high multiplier effect are other reasons for thinking that they may well occupy a large area in future UN country programmes.

Possible extension of country programming

5. A recurrent theme of conversation with national officials has been their assertion that, for its size, UN technical co-operation entails disproportionate effort on negotiation and subsequent administration. In many countries, external aid represents only a fraction - perhaps one tenth - of the total financial effort and of that fraction a mere 10 or 15 per cent may be contributed through UNDP and thus be the subject of Country Programming. It all looks pretty small through the other end of the telescope. This raises the question whether, once the present slice of reorganization has been digested, the system should not be widened to include the very significant contributions of UNICEF, WFP, the regular programmes of some specialized agencies, etc. etc. There are two strong arguments in favour of such incorporation. The first is that the present exclusion of these resources from Country Programming is a sort of anti-planning. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that UN aid is now tidily programmed in one neat package. National planning authorities still face, over a large area of the aid they draw from the UN family as a whole, the disadvantages that Country Programming is in the process of eliminating from the UNDP sector. This non-system also produces - after all the years of efforts at co-ordination - remarkable examples of overlapping resulting from converging approaches to the same subject: one agency has potentially unemployed children as its starting point, another starts from the world's food requirements in general, and both end up training fishermen in the same country. The second argument for extending the scope of Country Programming is that if, for the more effective deployment of aid, the UN calls on Governments to programme, national planners should surely know, before they start their work, what the total probable input of the UN family as a whole is likely to be, so that they can fit all together to the best advantage. Specialization of function also calls for greater rationalization than at present exists. It is difficult to see logic or efficiency in a system under which, for example, the WFP sometimes devises a project to justify the distribution of surplus food and subsequently calls for the technical support of a specialized agency, whereas on other occasions the roles are reversed.

Finally, it has been largely accepted that there is advantage in the autonomous status of some of the organizations referred to, but there seems no reason why this should be in any way affected by their suggested inclusion in the new form of programming. Perhaps it is not too soon to devote thought to this question and to associated problems that may be anticipated.

Concentration of UN aid

6. After two decades of UN assistance of increasing intensity, with technical advice at home and training abroad, many developing countries can pride themselves on standards of indigenous ability that rightly demand ever greater expertise from foreign advisers. The difficulty of finding specialists of standards high enough to meet this demand - of ensuring that UN advisers remain at a higher technical level than that of those whom they advise - has frequently been described as the most serious problem now confronting the UN Development System. In the long run, the problem is insoluble on the existing lines and it is perhaps time to start thinking about the desirability of switching, in certain cases, on to a different track. It seems reasonable to argue that countries, like individuals, move on to different educational requirements as their development proceeds; the schoolmaster yields place to the director of studies and in the same way the large, instructional project, with specialists in every sub-division of a subject, may with advantage give way to a small but highly qualified team of advisers at the highest level of execution of national policy. The experiments which are already being made in this direction should be closely watched as potential models for future technical assistance in a widening range of countries. Not only might such a pattern already be better tailored to the real needs of certain developing countries, but the greater degree of interest and responsibility implicit in such projects might well attract the more highly specialized expert that is going to be required to man them.

7. As with experts, so with projects. There is no good reason why the UN should feel obliged to provide technical assistance over the whole range of human endeavour. There are some things that bilateral

aid can do better and some fields in which, or some levels at which, multilateral technical assistance is more appropriate or more effective. Study of this subject, to establish where and how the UN family could best concentrate its efforts, could prove useful. Meanwhile, however, it would avoid much disappointment with UN aid if care were taken to avoid commitments which cannot be fully met. One suggestion in this connection has already been made from the JIU, namely, that, as part of the standard procedure for the preliminary examination of a project, UNDP should require the presumptive executing agency to submit a statement of the probability of recruiting, in good time, the specialists required. A second suggestion is that, when it is found that a project undertaken cannot be put into execution in reasonable time, the country concerned should be so informed at an early date and thus enabled to seek other help in what may be a vital sector of its development plan. Sadly, this is by no means a hypothetical case.

8. Some national planners have stated their intention, once they have worked through the remaining stock of continuing operations, to move in the direction of a UN aid programme of fewer but larger projects. This might very well be a step on the right road and one which the UN itself should consider following. To do half as much twice as well would be no bad slogan to work by. A more brutal expression of the same thought once overheard is that UN aid should be a high-ranking and highly valued privilege, not a cheap line about which everyone complains.

Plans of operation

9. Comparison of recent with older plans of operation reveals how much their drafting has developed with experience over the years. Nevertheless, it is suggested that close and careful revision of their terminology is now not only desirable but important. It would be helpful to seek the advice of an independent legal draftsman, handing him a selection of recent examples picked out at random and requesting his uninhibited criticism and suggestions for improvement. One of the chief offenders among the present word-force is the grossly overworked "Project".

Admirably and succinctly defined in the Pocket Oxford Dictionary as "a scheme or plan", this word has come to mean in UN parlance everything from the intention of helping a Member State in a certain activity to the final product of such activity in the form of a technical institute or whatever it may be, with no holds barred in between. This is not merely a question of semantics; this one offender lies at the root of much misunderstanding and positive friction in aid operations. "Project manager", "project vehicles", "the output of the project" - all these expressions beg the question what and whose is a project, and give rise continuously to such expressions as "the project has good Government support", as though the Government were helping the UN to do something it wished to achieve and not vice versa. This wide, indiscriminate use of the word to mean "exactly what we wish it to mean" in any given context masks the real, complicated nature of a technical assistance operation in which (for example), along lines accepted by signed agreement, a national team under a national Director works with a UN team under a UN team leader in a joint effort to establish a national institute. In this effort the UN team will take the lead at the start - that is why they have been called in to help - but gradually, as the operation progresses, they will step back and the national team will step forward. Failure to distinguish clearly between the two teams throughout the plan of operation and to keep firmly in mind the gradually changing relationship between them complicates the always difficult task of wholehearted, understanding collaboration through circumstances in which minor or even major conflicts of interest and authority are very liable to arise.

10. This is an appropriate point at which to mention, in connection with plans of operation, a minor but not infrequent opportunity for economy - that of their ceremonial signature. The practice is unobjectionable if a journey planned for other reasons happens to coincide with the culmination of the negotiation of a plan; meritorious if it accelerates such negotiation; a positive hindrance if it delays signature; and a signal waste of money, time and energy for all concerned

if a journey is made for the sole purpose of appending a signature in a beneficiary country rather than at Headquarters. This is not merely a personal notion; it has been ventilated and has evoked approval in several developing countries.

UNDP field offices

11 Perusal of staff files in UNDP field offices reveals, to one more used to national than to international practice, an abnormal degree of choosiness with regard to postings. It is inevitable that prejudices or rumours about living conditions in any given country should circulate and be taken into consideration by a specialist weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of accepting an offer of employment under a fixed-term contract in a UN technical assistance operation, but relatively permanent members of a world-wide service should be more prepared to take the rough with the smooth than some now seem ready to do. Firmer policy in this respect at Headquarters would be an encouragement to the uncomplaining many who see the few profit by their recalcitrance.

12. The serious undermanning of UNDP posts that sometimes comes to light may not be unconnected with this apparent softness in personnel policy. The enhanced role of the Resident Representative and his staff under Country Programming means that undermanning and consequent overloading would have even more serious consequences in future than they have had in the past. The relation of UNDP offices in the field to the execution as opposed to the programming of projects is still in need of closer definition, but concrete examples, which it would not be appropriate to identify in a formal report, show that weakness in the Resident Representative's office can and does produce unhappy results also on field operations. In a recent example, injudicious removal of junior staff without provision for timely replacement had unhappy consequences as a result of the breaking of contact with those subordinate levels of aid activities at which the first warning signs of impending difficulties often appear. The complication of administering an effective personnel policy is fully appreciated, but one wonders whether more sympathetic realization of local difficulties could not sometimes with advantage lead to more imaginative solutions, such as the temporary loan of help from nearby, better-heeled posts.

After-care

13. Passing acquaintance with hundreds of aid operations over four years of inspection brings home the growing importance of carefully considered phasing-out. If the UN continues to carry the baby, it will never learn to walk and nursing becomes expensive; but the fruit of past efforts can be wasted if the baby is simply dropped on the ground. There ought to be more provision than there is for post-operational consultation.

Suggestions have been made for continued contact by correspondence with the Headquarters of former executing agencies (which seems a very proper role for a world-wide specialized agency to play), but, in practice, these Headquarters are often too overstretched to be able to cope with the additional work entailed. Nevertheless, such correspondence would be infinitely less expensive than the alternative - often adopted - of continuing assistance in the field, and certainly more helpful than simply leaving the ex-client to swim or sink. Another possibility is that specialist consultants should be available at Headquarters to visit the scenes of former operations, on request in cases of emergency, or in the course of wider-ranging tours with the agreement of Governments. It seems by no means impossible that the resources required to set up a system adequate to deal with this problem might be realized from savings on some operations now prolonged largely on the ground that full hand-over would be premature. However that may be, the first step would be to decide whether, under Country Programming, this will indeed continue to be a problem in its own right and, if so, to set up institutional machinery to deal with it.

Probation for project personnel

14. Reference has already been made in paragraph 6 above to the frequently expressed dissatisfaction of counterpart authorities with the standard of specialists recruited for technical co-operation missions. Doubtless an Inspector hears more about the bad than about the good and on questions of competence there is often room for debate, but when the complaint is on grounds of incompatibility or failure to adapt to circumstances it is disappointing, to say the least, that so little can be done about the problem other than await the expiry of the period of contract. On the

other side of the medal, there is no end to the protests one hears about the insecurity of tenure that so often occurs towards the end of contracts even when all indications are that service will be continued. In these circumstances, worries about family, rent, removal, schooling and the rest inevitably prevent a man from giving of his best to his work, and this often over months, rather than weeks. It might perhaps be carefully considered whether both these very often legitimate complaints could not be simultaneously met by the introduction of a system embodying, in principle, a period of probation at the beginning of a contract and a reasonable assurance that, probation once successfully over and other things being reasonably equal, employment would normally be extended to the full period of the UNDP operation concerned, provided, of course, that the individual still had a role to play. The period of initial uncertainty might perhaps make recruitment marginally more difficult than it already is, but presumably nobody wishes to make it easier at the cost of employing more of those who have reason to be uncertain.

Operational teams - general

15. A quick glance at the location of UN aid operations around the world shows that the great majority work in capital cities. In many, if not most cases, it can be reasonably argued that this is right and proper, since the primarily advisory or training functions of a team must normally be exercised at the seat of government or at the centre of gravity of population. However, there are many operations, directed towards research or exploration for example, where the seat of activity is remote from the capital in which nevertheless the UN team are resident and have their office, sometimes travelling up to 300 kilometres to the scene of their field work. Each case must, of course, be judged on its own merits, but there may very well be a case for thinking that Headquarters policy on this question is sometimes unduly soft.

16. In one instance recently encountered, serious trouble in a UN operation was sparked off by refusal by members of a team to accept the authority of an acting team leader appointed on the departure of the titular manager. This was a special case, but the circumstances could easily be repeated elsewhere. It might therefore be worth considering whether, in certain

circumstances, where a fairly large team is concerned, it might not be a reasonable insurance against similar trouble to have an informal understanding between Government, UNDP, executing agency and field team regarding the person looked upon as second-in-command and destined to take charge during the temporary absence of the titular team leader or after the latter's transfer.

Fellowships and seminars

17. Much thought has been devoted, without appreciable result so far, to the dilemma presented by the break in the all-important personal relationship between a UN specialist and his counterpart(s) when the latter is (are) on fellowship abroad. The difficulty is magnified by the frequent lack of information about the courses of training to which the fellowship holder may be redirected during his absence. In some instances, fellows may return having followed studies within their competence indeed, but bearing little relevance to the specific purpose for which the fellowship was provided. Some enquiries from the field have met the response that the shape of a fellow's course of training should be no concern of his "principal". The latter, however, recruited for his expertise in the discipline concerned and presumably well acquainted, after some experience of the operation, with its real requirements, might well have useful ideas on the direction and content of his counterpart's training and, as the man on the spot, should perhaps be heard.

18. Finally, so many comments made by participants in seminars coincide in their criticism of the method of approach to the exercise that the gist of these observations should perhaps be passed on. Generally, the ex cathedra approach so frequently adopted is regarded as outmoded. Assistant Secretaries of Government and others of comparable rank, gathered together and returned, as it were, to the schoolroom to listen to a series of prepared lectures, are entitled to think that their time and travel have been wasted. It would certainly be unwise not to insure, by careful preparation, against the possibility of a seminar's "drying up", but a really skilled seminar director, in spite of the difficulty of gauging in advance, from their curricula vitae, what the intellectual standard of participants is going to be, will quickly recognize when he has in front of him a flock who will benefit more by interchange of opinions than by passive intake of information and advice and will have the wisdom and flexibility at this stage to put his prepared script into his pocket and get on with his true job of inspiring and steering the debate.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That wide-ranging "country inspections" should not necessarily be grouped together (paragraph 1).
2. That thought should be given now to the eventual incorporation of other UN "inputs" into the system of Country Programming (paragraph 5).
3. That close attention should be paid to current experiments in small, concentrated, high-level projects as possible models for the future in appropriate circumstances (paragraph 6).
4. That UN aid should try to avoid the temptation of omni-competence (paragraph 7).
5. That, at the time of examination of suggested projects, UNDP should ask prospective executing agencies for a forecast of recruitment prospects (paragraph 7).
6. That projects important for a developing country's economy should be put into operation with all speed, or else, with Government agreement, dropped (paragraph 7).
7. That the advice of an expert legal draftsman should be taken to improve the wording of plans of operation (paragraph 9).
8. That proposals for the ceremonial signature of plans of operation should be carefully scrutinized in the interest of economy (paragraph 10).
9. That a tougher policy should be adopted on the posting of UNDP staff (paragraph 11).
10. That great care should be taken to insure against the temporary understaffing of UNDP offices (paragraph 12).
11. That a cheaper but effective method of supplying post-project help should be devised (paragraph 13).
12. That a period of probation, linked with more secure tenure of office after probation, should be devised for UN technical assistance specialists (paragraph 14).

13. That UN teams should live at their place of work as far as possible (paragraph 15).
14. That, in certain large operations, a presumptive acting team leader should be designated in advance (paragraph 17).
15. That UN specialists should have a say in the courses of training to be followed by their counterparts (paragraph 17).
16. That seminars should, in all appropriate cases, avoid the ex cathedra approach (paragraph 18).

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