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**THE REGIONAL DIMENSION  
AND  
THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS IN  
OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The successive adoption by the General Assembly over the past few years of a series of resolutions concerned with operational activities for development has triggered far reaching reforms within the United Nations system.

The follow-up of these resolutions has resulted in an unprecedented move towards decentralization of development activities to the regions resulting primarily in a considerably strengthened Resident Coordinators system at the country level. The UNDP Governing Council, in particular, has taken important decisions with a view to strengthening national capacities by way of successor arrangements to support costs, national execution and integrated programme approaches. These changes and challenges have had an important impact on all Executing Agencies which was however more particularly felt by the smaller specialized agencies and the Regional Commissions.

At this point in time evidence seems to suggest that paradoxically it was this process which has resulted in a significant loss of recognition of the Regional Commissions as operational partners in development. By attributing them a status of so called "small" executing agencies hence not eligible for the "new system" of project execution reserved for the five major agencies the Regional Commissions have not only witnessed the sudden shrinking of resources required for their operational activities but more importantly have been marginalized in their mandated role in operational programme and projects activities. The exclusion of the Regional Commissions from, practically, all operational activities funded from UNDP at the historical moment when the latter's centrality in operational activities has been reconfirmed and considerably strengthened has undoubtedly deprived the system of one of the most critical linkages to sustain the present operational framework in the regions.

### **A. POLICY FRAMEWORK**

The question of comprehensive decentralization of operational activities to the regional level should not be addressed without taking into consideration the evolution of the UN system since adoption of Resolution 37/197 adopted in 1977 which actually continues to be the basic and most comprehensive legal framework from which the present decentralization and restructuring process has been drawing its orientation.

Section V of this resolution on "operational activities of the United Nations System" provided the basis for the central role of UNDP at the country level in the spirit of the "Consensus of 1970" whereas Section IV on "Structures for regional and interregional cooperation" established the operational framework at the regional level under the leadership of the regional Commissions.

At the same time the resolution provided a framework for the necessary linkages in terms of policy coordination and organizational structures between operational activities at the country level and regional and interregional cooperation thus, reflecting the all embracing "consensus" adopted in 1970.

To date after more than 30 years of continued efforts to bring the United Nations System capacity closer to the regions and considering the continued efforts to consolidate and strengthen the central role of UNDP in operational activities some questions must be raised:

"Where do we stand at the regional level?

What is the role of Regional Commissions?

Has the legislation of 32/197 achieved its intended goal and served its purpose?

Where do the problems lie?

How can they be addressed and solved?

Any comparison between the existing instruments of legislative framework, in particular between 44/211 and 37/197 would leave no doubt that the regional dimension of development as perceived in the latter has been practically eliminated in the former. 44/211 makes little reference to the regional issues.

On the other hand however there is increasing awareness that problems in the follow-up of this latest resolution are directly related to the complexities involved in addressing those operational issues which point to dimensions which require far more than country limited strategies.

One major issue of the present problematic seems to be related to new requirements for comprehensive multidisciplinary development approaches. Another directly linked issue is the question of how to establish the desirable linkages between national, sub-regional and regional activities.

The paramount importance of these issues has been repeatedly highlighted by the Secretary General in his policy reviews of operational activities for development expressing concerns about lack of capacity to appropriately address them. Undoubtedly have these issues greatly determined his decisions in the present decentralization process of the Secretariat.

## **B. REGIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

It may be useful to recall the salient features of the Regional Commissions' mandate as well as of their activities which have direct bearing on the issues under consideration.

In his letter of 1 April 1993 on decentralization to the regional level addressed to the Heads of the five Regional Commissions the Secretary-General summarized the responsibilities of the Regional Commissions as follows:

- to function as the main general economic and social development centres within the United Nations system for their respective regions;
- to exercise team leadership and responsibility for co-ordination and co-operation at the regional level;
- to provide inputs for global policy-making processes of the competent United Nations organs and to participate fully in the implementation of the relevant policy and programme decisions taken by these organs;
- to participate actively in operational activities particularly as regards sub-regional, regional and inter-regional projects of an intersectoral nature
- to assist in strengthening regional co-operation and help promote effective inter-regional co-operation.

Expressing further his views on the desirable policy approach to decentralizations he said the following:

"Decentralization is best regarded as a functional process involving a more effective distribution of responsibilities and tasks between global and regional entities which takes full account of the distinct mandates and special characteristics of the commissions within the overall structure of the United Nations. .... first The commissions should be viewed as the regional arms of a single integrated UN programme in the socio-economic field rather than disparate, separate entities; second their participation in and contribution to the global work of Headquarters entities should be enhanced and the mechanisms for programmatic interaction strengthened; and third, each commission must have its own field of activities, and by implication its own responsibilities and corresponding resources and further multisectoral requirements of activities".

The Secretary General's vision of the Role of the Regional Commissions sustained by action already in process indicates by implication the necessary reforms required for establishing a sound and effective relationship between them and all other partners within the system.

### **C. WHAT CAN THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS OFFER?**

Much has been said in the past of the comparative advantages which should be tapped in order to enhance the operational effectiveness and impact of the system.

The regional commissions present in many ways a comparative advantage which is unmatched by any other organization of the system. This comparative advantage is based on the basic principles of operational effectiveness for the following reasons:

1. The institutional and legislative machinery of the commissions integrates ipso facto the ownership of their programmes of work by the governments of all countries of their respective regions. The programmatic priorities and objectives of the Commissions work programmes are the immediate product of their member countries as without them the Commissions do not exist.

2. The conceptual and analytical capacity of the Regional Commissions is in comparison with any other organization or body of the system based on an organizational multidisciplinary framework generated by the sybiosis with the countries of the regions and their development objectives.

3. The promotion of national capacities in development activities is actually a way of life in the Regional Commissions as their staff as well as operational expertise provided by them is mainly drawn from the countries of their regions.

4. Decentralization of operational activities should also promote the purchasing of project equipment at the local level in order to sustain indigenous business capacity. The average procurement from developing countries for all commissions was 40 per cent in 1991 \*/. This compared quite favourably with the level of 24 per cent achieved in the same time by the UNDP/OPS/UNFPA-UNICEF group and even more favourably when compared with UNFPA alone showing a low 7.98 per cent or one fifth only of the regional commissions level of procurement from developing countries.

The question ,therefore arises on what areas is it logical to start from a regional approach? In what areas should the United Nations system automatically look to the Commissions as a focal point for action?

#### **D. PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION**

The areas which define the regional dimension on the African continent are chiefly derived from the following considerations:

(a) The majority of African countries is small, and unlikely to develop self-reliant economies without trade with, and support from, their neighbours. The situation is especially acute for the least-developed, landlocked and island developing countries. Sub-regional and regional economic community is an obvious and inevitable goal, and one which has received highest **home grown commitment** through the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community which has now been ratified and entered into force. What mechanism other than regional integration is expected to move Africa forward?

(b) Regional commissions and in particular the Regional Commission for Africa have an important role to play in the international trade negotiations and their subsequent effects on commodity agreements. This is especially an issue at the present time, following the conclusions on the Uruguay Round when there is a consolidation of the formation of regional trading blocs in Europe, the Americas, and parts of Asia, which threatens to isolate Africa from world markets;

(c) Debt and development is another obvious area as there seems to be a definite need for systematic action with the support of the regional development banks and other multilateral bodies of regional dimensions for each of the major indebted areas - in particular the African continent.

(d) For ECA, United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF) which has been adopted by the General Assembly as part of the United Nations Medium-term Plan, and the system wide Plan of Action which is being developed from it, are clearly priorities where the Commission has a dominant role within the region. Africa's unique needs of economic transformation and diversification require special focus on industrialization and technology, sub-regional food security and self-sufficiency, monetary unions and harmonization of export commodity policies. In no other organization can all these issues be dealt with under the same roof;

(e) Multidisciplinary work in relation to the framework of regionally agreed policies and strategies is a mechanism that regional commissions do use effectively to address the priorities of the regions which to a great extent have similar features but also marked differences in some areas reflecting the originality of each region.

Since inception of Resolution 44/211, ECA has been intensifying its efforts to galvanize new multidisciplinary operational approaches to Africa's development problems by providing flexible, coherent solutions, particularly to those related to the above dimensions -- external debt, structural adjustment, trade in commodities, energy crises, and environmental degradation including increasingly emergency, humanitarian rehabilitation and reconstruction affairs. These problems are often complex in nature; they have multidimensional implication; and, given the limited size and resources of many of Africa's countries, the co-operation of national sectors, neighbouring countries, and other groupings is often a necessity. The solutions must be long-lasting and must provide policy-makers with comprehensive responses, incorporating all the technical, economic and managerial aspects of the problem.

To better address these complex issues, ECA has established a Multidisciplinary Regional Advisory Group (ECA-MRAG), a task force under the direct supervision and the overall leadership of the Executive Secretary. The Group is composed of senior experts in various key disciplines including economic cooperation and integration, and is charged with strengthening the links between ECA's research and analysis, and their effects on African development. The group:

(a) Assists countries to translate regionally-agreed policies into practical strategies and programmes;

(b) Provides multisectoral analyses of African needs in the priority areas, and time-bound strategies for achieving the objectives contained in those priorities;

(c) Develops, with member States and sub-regional economic communities, annual programmes of multidisciplinary technical assistance; and

(d) Provides multidisciplinary technical assistance teams to African countries based on those programmes.

ECA-MRAG also draws on the skills available in the substantive ECA divisions. These include nearly three hundred sectoral experts with extensive knowledge of Africa and its problems. These experts are organized into more than a dozen major sectors of activities, thus making ECA the foremost multidisciplinary United Nations institution in the region.

The provision of multidisciplinary regional advisory services is only one amongst many endeavours of ECA to give operational meaning to its activities. Other actions, are focused on new thematic approaches adopted for the medium term plan 1992-1997 and corresponding internal restructuring of the organization which will undoubtedly result in a strengthened multidisciplinary capacity of the Organization to be reflected in both its regular and extrabudgetary funded activities.

Similar reorientations enhancing regional multidisciplinary concepts and approaches of work have been adopted since a long time by all other Regional Commissions.

## **E. CHALLENGES AHEAD**

The evolving perception of the Regional Commissions as "an essential part of the greater whole of the overall activities of the United Nations in the economic and social fields" suggests that decisive measures be taken to make this role more effective to eventually tap " their strength which lies in their multidisciplinary capacity to mediate between global and national activities" \*\*/.

CCPOQ is an ideal place where to discuss appropriate ways and means on how to integrate the regional dimension into the system's development activities.

From ECA's point of view, which reflects the joint position of the Regional Commissions on the issues under consideration would require to be particularly examined with a view to reforming existing policies structures, and procedures for regional development activities.

In this context the relationship between the Regional Commissions and the Resident Coordinators should be reassessed.

Regrettably this long standing relationship has been unable to foster the desirable spirit of cooperation and understanding of respective roles and capacities at the regional, sub-regional and national level.

The integrated programming approach at the country level has not yet taken into consideration the linkages which need to be established with regional and sub-regional programmes at the same time. This means that strategic goals and objectives as formulated by the Regional Commissions on the basis the needs of their member States have been faced with great difficulties to be integrated into the framework of reference of development activities coordinated at the country level. This means also that the impact of regional projects in support to regional priorities has been greatly impaired. The considerable decrease of UNDP resources to regional activities coupled with the

exclusion of the regional commissions from the new executing arrangements eloquently reflects this regrettable state of affairs. Furthermore, regional advisory services chiefly aimed at providing integrated approaches to development activities as provided by the Commissions have remained in complete isolation from other on going operational programmes and activities. Significantly, most of the activities of ECA's multidisciplinary regional advisory group fully operational since about three years, have never yielded any significant reaction from the resident coordinators of the African region.

There is by now a significant increase of regional advisory services available from the Regional Commissions as a result of the implementation of the second phase of the restructuring of the Secretariat. ECA alone will have in the context of its multidisciplinary advisory group a critical mass of about 20 high level experts which are meant to be its operational armada to be on permanent call for immediate tasks to be undertaken at the country, subregional and regional levels for multidisciplinary programming and project related activities.

We see in this new force an ideal operational potential to strengthen the country programming on one hand and to integrate the regional dimension in operational activities on the other hand.

To achieve this twifold purpose it will however be necessary that the existing rules and procedures including the terms of reference of the resident coordinators make the necessary provisions for clearly spelling out the regional priorities in programming and implementation of exercises.

The principles for and guidelines on the role and functions of resident coordinators developed by ACC stress that the Resident Coordinators "should be encouraged to take full account of regional and interregional dimensions in development".

They further call for compliance of the Resident Coordinators with decisions of the ECOSOC and the General Assembly as well as of the ACC machinery relevant to operational activities particularly emphasising the need for information sharing on developments related to socio-economic changes within the regions. The guidelines point to the need of a clear division of labour among the various system partners in the programming processes and overwhelmingly stress the enhancement of multidisciplinary approaches to development.

The consolidated draft statement on the role and functions of resident coordinators to be considered by CCPOQ reflect these general concerns but would need to be sharpened to clearly identify the role and functions of the regional commissions in support of the Resident coordinators system.

It is therefore suggested to specify the expected contributions of the regional commissions under the relevant chapters and para concerned with:

- (a) team leadership;
- (b) provision of multidisciplinary advise;
- (c) preparation of the annual country review report;
- (d) public information activities; and
- (e) preparation of operational documentation.



The legitimate focus on the regional dimension in all operational activities would require to be reflected in relevant procedural instructions to be issued by the UNDP Administrator to the Resident Coordinators.

The desirable integration of the regional dimension into the activities of the Resident Coordinators system would be meaningless if the regional programmes undertaken by the UN system would not undergo a similar process of updating of institutional arrangements in which the role of the Regional Commissions would be further clarified.

The role and functions of the Regional Commissions in pursuance of the provisions made in Resolution 32/197 have become a matter of increased attention of ECOSOC and the General Assembly as an essential part of the revitalization of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations. The current process of restructuring indicates that the reforms underway must actually contribute to reinforcing the leadership role of the Regional Commissions at the regional level.

These reforms should therefore involve decisions to be taken to enhance the administrative and financial authority of the regional Commissions as well as to promote institutional arrangements facilitating their coordinating role at the regional level. In this context the joint position of the Regional Commissions on the delegation of authority of the Secretary General in the form of establishment of regional ACCs under the chairmanship of the executive secretaries of the Commissions would be a major prerequisite towards integrating the regional dimension in development.

Actually the regional commissions do already exercise leadership and coordination amongst UN system partners in a great number of regional activities of particular priority to their regions. The present coordinating role of ECA as mandated by the General Assembly in the implementation of UN-NADAF is one of these examples. Other conventional arrangements for interagency coordination at the regional level mainly in the form of joint divisions, shared premises, cooperation agreements etc. provide already a basis for a more efficiently organized institutional framework from which coherent and integrating programming processes around regional priorities could emerge.

There are many studies which have been undertaken in the course of the past two years to review the UN system Capacity to respond effectively to the specific needs of the regions.

The CCPOQ papers on "The regional dimensions of development" and "the Regional Economic Commissions, some new perspectives" are valuable contributions which need to be further examined and updated. Other studies in particular those of JIU, which have addressed various issues involved in the decentralization process have provided in-depth analysis of the regional aspects. CCPOQ will consider two of them ("A Review of the specific development needs of small member States and the responsiveness of the United Nations Development system to these needs" - JIU/REP/93/4" and Field representation of the United Nations System Organization: a more unitary approach - JIU/Rep/92/8).

Another report of JIU, also completed in this context, namely that on "Decentralization of organizations within the United Nations System" -JIU/REP/92/6 Part I and II) are unfortunately not included on the Agenda of CCPOQ as they would have further enriched the debate on the regional dimension of development and the Regional Commissions specific role in it.

All these efforts indicate that it has become abundantly clear that there is urgency involved in addressing the regional dimension of development and in working out an operational framework in which the objectives, relevant structures and coordination mechanisms are unambiguously defined.

This framework must therefore be conceived in such a way as to enable a coordinated approach to operational activities based on regional priorities which are effectively integrated into operational activities at the country, subregional and regional levels. The framework must also be conducive to adequate resources mobilization and allocation at these distinct levels of operation.

The present imbalance between regional and national development activities has resulted in an unjustifiable distortion of resources concentrated at national levels. The criteria for establishing regional IPFs, the location of regional bureaux of UNDP, as well as the policies and procedures for regional programming and projects by UNDP would seem to be amongst the issues which would require particular attention.

There is a wide scope for joint endeavours to be explored by all UN system partners for sharing their respective responsibilities in the regional dimension of development.

We are deprived of the wisdom of Sir Robert Jackson who deplored that he had no time to look into this dimension when he wrote the Capacity Study. However, in anticipation of regional developments he intimated a strongly felt need for a second part of the study to be written on the UN system capacity at the regional level.

We have no other choice than to write ourselves this indispensable **SECOND PART.**