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**PROGRESS REPORT ON THE NEW ORIENTATION OF
ECA ADVISORY SERVICES DURING THE 1990S**

INTRODUCTION

1. During the seventeenth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 9 to 13 May 1991, a report (E/ECA/CM.17/19) was presented describing the economic challenges that would face Africa in the 1990s and that the Commission was reorganizing and reorientating its advisory services to member countries to meet these challenges.
2. The report highlighted the fact that one of the major challenges that would confront ECA in the 1990s was the need for development of integrated, comprehensive and coherent solutions to problems that affect the entire region, particularly those related to external debt, structural adjustment, trade in commodities, energy crisis and environmental degradation. The report noted that, because of the complexity of these problems, and their multidimensional implications and given the limited size and resources of many African countries, there was need for cooperation of national sectors, neighbouring countries and other groupings.
3. The report further stressed the fact that the needed solutions to the economic development challenges that would face the region in the 1990s must, of necessity, be long-lasting and must provide policy-makers with comprehensive responses, incorporating all the technical, economic and managerial aspects of the problems that they entail. Consequently, ECA had decided to establish a Multidisciplinary Regional Advisory Group (ECA-MRAG) to assist member countries in finding lasting solutions to their economic development problems.
4. The composition of the Group varies depending on the problem being tackled. Experts are drawn from the areas of macro-economics; food and agriculture; development finance and debt management; public administration; statistics, and the application of national accounts to development; environment and development; energy development; social and human resource aspects of structural adjustment and transformation; and regional economic cooperation and integration.
5. The Group is under the direct supervision and the overall leadership of the Executive Secretary. Composed of such senior experts, the Group is charged with strengthening the links between ECA's research and analysis, and their effects on African development. The wide spectrum of professional expertise and wealth of experience in the Group facilitates the process, while also allowing the policy-maker to take into account the interdependence that exists among national, subregional and regional programmes and strategies. In pursuit of this, 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 subregional economic communities, annual programmes of multidisciplinary technical assistance; and
 - d) Provides, upon request, multidisciplinary technical assistance to African countries based on those programmes.
6. The Group provides consulting and advisory services exclusively to member States and their intergovernmental organizations. Such services are made available to member States at no cost and can be requested at any time, depending on the work programme of the Group.
7. In providing advice, the Group responds to requests for help on problems that member States and intergovernmental organizations encounter in their efforts to transform their economies. The Group provides the requesting States or organizations with a tentative assessment of the problem, a suggested work plan and

framework for solving it, and the composition of the advisory team which would have to be involved. In view of the practical approach of the Group, advice is given within a specific time-frame, with an agreed objective to be achieved by the end of that time. Where appropriate, the Group provides suggestions regarding possible future programmes of action, investment scenarios, etc.

8. The annual programme of the ECA-MRAG is developed after initial consultations with member States, intergovernmental organizations, and other United Nations agencies at annual meetings of the Multinational Programming and Operational Centres (MULPOCs), which are located in the five subregions of Africa, and represent the legitimate institutional structure of the United Nations at the subregional level.

A. Relations with ECA substantive divisions

9. In providing advice, members of the Group work in teams whose specific composition is determined by the particular request for assistance being addressed. The Group draws on the skills available in the substantive divisions. These include nearly 300 sectoral experts with extensive knowledge of Africa and its problems. These experts are organized into more than a dozen major programmes, thus making ECA the foremost multidisciplinary United Nations institution in the region. The Group also interacts on a continuous basis with their counterparts in the divisions and ensures that the support of the latter as well as the potential of ongoing policy research and analysis and other operational activities of the secretariat are brought to bear on the assistance being rendered.

10. In the fields of industrial development and transport and communications which are not fully represented in the Group as currently composed, the resources of the ECA-MRAG are supplemented not only by the expertise available in the substantive divisions covering these two important areas but also by the resources made available under the respective Decade programme for the areas.

B. Relations with MULPOCs

11. The ECA-MRAG comes as a supplement to the resources available at the Commission's MULPOCs with which it is working closely in identifying, on an annual basis, the technical assistance and cooperation requirements of member States at the subregional level in cooperation with all other relevant United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations. The Group is, in particular, assisting the MULPOCs in strengthening their capacity for identifying, formulating and implementing inter-country projects.

C. Relations with member States and their intergovernmental organizations

12. The ECA-MRAG has been established for the exclusive use of member States and their intergovernmental organizations who individually and collectively can call for the service of the Group to advise on development problems on a short-term basis which, as stated already, is free of charge. Governments and organizations are accordingly urged to address their specific requests for the services of the Group to the ECA-MRAG Coordinator or directly to the Executive Secretary, or through the Director of the ECA-MULPOC operating in their subregion.

I. **OPERATIONALIZATION OF MRAG**

A. Establishment

13. The ECA-MRAG was established in December 1990. Its purpose was to put into operation the major policy objectives of the Commission which were considered to be:

(a) Support to regional economic cooperation and integration, including the establishment of the African Economic Community;

- (b) Support to the transformation of African economies;
- (c) Support to the priority sectors of the Lagos Plan of Action; and
- (d) Enhancement of institutional and managerial capacity and the analysis of policy responses to environmental problems.

14. It was intended to provide this support through a multidisciplinary approach of technical assistance unique in the operations of ECA. The team was to comprise two advisers on economic cooperation and integration; and one adviser on each of the following: structural adjustment (macro-economics); development finance and debt management; public administration and management; social concerns and human resource dimensions of structural adjustment; statistics and the application of national accounts to development; food and agriculture; environment and development; and energy policies.

15. However, by the time the Group was formally established only five regional advisers were on board. These were advisers on energy, agriculture, environment, statistics, and public administration. An adviser on economic cooperation and integration was recruited in March 1991.

16. This limitation notwithstanding, the Group has, through its sectoral initiatives, created the multidisciplinary approach that would have flowed naturally if the broader-based advisers in macro-economics, regional integration and social development had been present.

B. Activities

17. During the year, the Group was constrained to devote most of its activities to the third priority listed above although it also involved itself, to a certain extent, with the second.

18. Efforts were made to recruit new advisers to fill the gap. By the end of 1991, two new members were added to the Group, a macro-economist and an expert on social concerns and human resources.

19. In spite of the fact that the Group is yet to reach its full staff strength, it nonetheless made positive steps to assume its new role. The first six advisers carried out programming meetings for 1991 in the five MULPOCs, thus genuinely developing its programme using the subregional level as a base. A policy document, entitled "Operational framework of the ECA Multidisciplinary Regional Advisory Group" was prepared and distributed as a way of leading the divisions of ECA into more authentic multisectoral cooperation. A brochure on the ECA-MRAG in the three official languages was published and distributed throughout the region. This was followed by a series of consultations with the ECA Divisions aimed at reviewing the organization and management of the Group, preparing a work programme for 1992, and promoting the concept of multidisciplinary within the house.

20. In terms of programming activities, the Group carried out 24 missions during the year, of which 16 were implemented, and 8 were reprogrammed. About 50 per cent of these were multidisciplinary in nature, with requests linked to the priority objectives of subregional groupings such as ECOWAS, PTA, ECCAS, CEPGL, SADCC, etc. It is noteworthy that these requests included organizations (such as PTA) which had hitherto not been particularly enthusiastic in cooperating with ECA. There were, therefore, signs of renewed confidence in the Commission as a result of the ECA-MRAG. In the year under consideration, the services rendered were, as expected, quite varied. They included, for example, assistance in the formulation of short-term training courses as well as techniques of improving national systems for monitoring agricultural and rural development projects.

C. Organization and management

21. In order to make the MRAG a fully functioning multidisciplinary group during the current year, the following actions are to be taken:

(a) The Group will start functioning as a substantive, independent unit of ECA. To this effect, a coordinator for the group has been designated; and

(b) The Group would be given very strong administrative support by the secretariat of ECA by providing it with secretaries, common space, automation equipment, telephone, etc., at the earliest opportunity.

D. Proposed work programme for 1992

22. The proposed work programme of the Group for 1992 entails undertaking reprogrammed missions of last year as well as new requests which continue to be received. As each new request is received, it is carefully reviewed and, where necessary, reformulated in order to reflect a truly multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach to problem-solving. The requests which have been received so far are, again, varied. They include review of treaties of various intergovernmental organizations, preparation of policy documents, establishment of research and extension networks, application of national accounts to development as well as strategies for combating desertification.

II. CONCLUSION

23. The ECA-MRAG has, in its short period of existence, shown that multidisciplinary technical assistance is possible in ECA. It is an original, though limited, response to the challenges of African development. Its establishment, a whole year before other United Nations agencies moved into the multidisciplinary field, remains a model for the United Nations system. Given the fact that Africa is the last frontier for world development, the ECA-MRAG has the opportunity to participate, among other things, in the institutional, structural and environmental challenges and opportunities in support of successful African endeavours.

24. The importance of the ECA multidisciplinary advisory service for the future has been heightened by the emerging world of trading blocs, which threaten to isolate Africa from world markets, and by the collapse of communism which has captured the imagination and compassion of governments and peoples of the industrialized countries resulting in increasing evidence of indifference, of withdrawal, if not abandonment on the part of these countries towards Africa. This disturbing trend has given increased attention to ECA's multidisciplinary regional advisory service role in: (a) the development and promotion of Africa's own Economic Community based on subregional cooperation and integration; (b) rehabilitation and development of food and agriculture; and (c) integration of environmental dimension in economic planning.

25. It is expected that the member States and their intergovernmental organizations, who are the beneficiaries of the outputs of the ECA-MRAG, would make full use of this latest initiative of ECA in its service to Africa. In many respects, the ECA-MRAG constitutes one of the essential keys to their efforts towards Africa's recovery, development and transformation. We all must learn how to use this key effectively without delay and without hesitation, particularly in the emerging new world order.