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A. Introduction

1. ECA's terms of reference urge it, inter alia, to "initiate and participate in measures for facilitating concerted action for the economic development of Africa .., for maintaining and strengthening economic relations of countries and territories of Africa ... among themselves", and in this connexion, to assist "in the formulation and development of co-ordinated policies" for its member States. Accordingly, the Commission's very first session laid stress on co-operative action among the African countries in practically all economic sectors. In particular, the first resolution of the Commission called upon it to establish liaison with existing African inter-governmental organizations working in the field of economic and social development. This has, in practice, meant pursuing a strategy of concerted action, not only by all the States members of the Commission, but also on a limited scale, no matter how small the geographic area, or how few the number of countries involved.

2. The continental approach had earlier been advocated by the Conference of Independent African States with whom the first Commission resolution had urged the ECA to maintain close contacts, and was to be strongly supported by the OAU with whom the closest connexions prevail. This procedure has been readily adopted whenever the subject-matter permitted, since it is the obvious gateway to the ultimate goal of economic union to which both the OAU and the Commission have also pledged themselves. The African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), the African Development Bank (ADB), the African Civil Aviation Commission, the Association of African Airlines, and the African Trade Centre, are some of the vital development institutions already established on this scale. Further, in such areas as the construction of a telecommunications network to link up the entire continent and the search for improved trade and aid terms for the member States, the united action of all the members is proving more expedient. The merits of the geographically narrower, close neighbourhood approach, as opposed to the continental, were also given recognition in the

Commission's first programme of work and priorities. Of particular significance were the following projects: assistance to the North African countries in the concerted development of sea fisheries and esparto grass; studies to determine the agricultural, industrial and other aspects of a Maghreb economic unit; and assessment of the opportunities of strengthening economic contacts among the West African countries to their mutual benefit.

3. The argument for this latter procedure derives its force from the well-known obstacles to continental action in African economic development, such as the vastness of the continent itself, the inadequate state of communications, and wide political, cultural and ethnic diversities. As foreseen by Commission resolution 23(III), the best immediate practical approach in such a situation was to make effective provision for dealing with "economic problems peculiar to sub-regions". This necessitated the temporary grouping of member States into separate sub-regions, with each group supported by a sub-regional office. Given the rather severe limitations on its resources, ECA decided to establish only four such sub-regions, in a phased programme spread over a period of four years. In the event, two of these (Eastern and Western) sub-regions with fourteen countries each, proved too large for one sub-regional office to serve satisfactorily. It did not take long to discover the budgetary constraints made it impossible to offer improved service to even the smaller sub-regional groupings.

B. The rationale and outlook of the sub-regional groupings

4. For a variety of reasons, the pre-independence inter-governmental groupings did not seem ready in the early years of the Commission to operate as adequate vehicles for promoting economic co-operation on the desired scale. First, many of them had been based on the principle of complementarity of their members' economies with those of their respective metropolitan countries, and had not yet demonstrated any strong inclination to forge equally strong links with their immediate neighbours in the continent.

Secondly, most of these groupings offered markets that were still too small in size to permit the optimal exploitation of their development opportunities. Thirdly, a good many of them were confined to limited objectives, while the examples of economic co-operation elsewhere suggested that greater benefit could be derived from the multi-purpose type of organization. Fourthly, several of these groupings were only then being newly established, or in the process of reconstruction, and had not had sufficient time to prove themselves in the pursuit of their economic co-operation objectives. Finally, there were large numbers of other African countries belonging to no formal groupings, and isolated from even those geographically nearest to them by linguistic, cultural and historical differences. It was mainly to overcome the limitations of the existing structure of inter-governmental groupings and diseconomies inherent in their operations, that ECA proposed in their place sub-regional inter-governmental structures.

5. Resource constraints notwithstanding, economic integration on a sub-regional basis quickly became the key element in ECA strategy, dictating the selection of projects and formulation of plans for their implementation in all economic sectors. To cite only a few examples, it was demonstrated in the early years of the Commission that the only way of ensuring a rational pattern of planning and construction of viable projects in such key sectors as energy, agriculture, industry and transport was to design them within a sub-regional mould. Moreover, the scope for trading partnerships and economic utilization of high-level manpower training and development institutes, as well as technological research centres, has always grown visibly wider within a sub-regional setting. Repeated assessments of the opportunities of co-operative partnerships among the African countries have also confirmed that multinational co-operation within the sub-regional framework could lead to faster economic growth for each partner in such co-operative associations than separate national efforts. Indeed, for the economically least developed areas, the choice between the two courses of action has often been regarded as virtually one between economic and social advance or stagnation.

6. It has, however, now emerged from a general decade-end review of the progress of the sub-regional groupings and the findings of two missions sent out in mid-1970 by the ECA Executive Committee to West and Central Africa to appraise the outlook of these groupings, that the attempt to create new, fully fledged inter-governmental machinery for decision-making and action on a sub-regional basis will, for some years to come, be beset with a number of adverse factors. The failure to find a satisfactory formula for distributing benefits in co-operation schemes among their members, particularly the most disadvantaged, appears to have produced a certain disenchantment with inter-governmental consultative machinery. There was therefore a certain scepticism about the chances of achieving an equitable settlement of this problem in new groupings, where older ones, enjoying greater cohesion among their members, had failed. The resulting reaction to the proposal to set up new groupings with comprehensive aims such as the ECA proposed for the sub-regional groupings was consequently one of caution and suspicion. It is therefore not surprising that there was a marked preference for tentative approaches to co-operation involving the minimum of national commitment. The result was a large number of generally unambitious co-operative schemes, such as those confined to co-ordinated water resources utilization, transport, research, and marketing of single agricultural export commodities, intra-trade in a few selected items, etc.

7. Political factors, dictating shifting alliances, have also prevented the large sub-regional organs from taking root in some sub-regions, while entirely discouraging their emergence in others. So potent is the influence of these factors that they have sometimes threatened the survival of even older institutions, in which common accord seems to have already been found on many difficult issues. In the circumstances, the proposed treaties under which the organs for sub-regional policy-making and execution were to be set up to ensure co-ordinated development in all the sectors, appeared over-ambitious to most of the African countries. For the very comprehensive nature of these treaties made them unacceptable to most States that were already somewhat uneasy about ceding decision-making powers over the same sensitive subjects to their even more familiar, older, co-operative organs.

8. At the same time, many of the arguments for preferring new institutional structures to those inter-governmental groupings established on non-ECA initiative have lost most of their force. These latter groupings have grown so fast in number that they could readily absorb all the member States of the Commission; indeed, there are already instances where such a trend is clearly in evidence. This process is now being facilitated by the fact that most of the groupings are expanding their objectives beyond the narrow scope they earlier set themselves. Moreover, with time, there has been built up a tradition of negotiation within these small groupings, which has engendered mutual confidence among their members and brought about remarkable cohesiveness within many of them. The result has been greater ease in reaching consensus on some rather sensitive subjects that have proved too strong a test to national sovereignty in the newer, larger sub-regional groupings. The older groupings have also had time to establish or strengthen their civil service structures for implementing agreed decisions, and many now sustain an impressive volume of activity through their ability to supplement their own financial resources with external aid.

9. It could therefore be said that most of these groupings have now reached a stage in their development, where they could be depended upon, with the necessary assistance, to carry through co-operative partnership schemes of a wide variety. Indeed, a problem that has now arisen with the expansion in the number of groupings and their programmes of work is one of duplication of activities. This, in extreme cases, sometimes manifests itself in one State retaining membership of two or more groupings with aims and objectives that overlap in varying degrees. Such overlapping also exists between most inter-governmental organizations and ECA, since the latter's work programme has been based largely on the same objectives and priorities of the States members of the Commission, as seen through their sub-regional groupings. The effect of this has been to put great pressure on the resources of the individual countries, their inter-State organs, and ECA, which have all had to be committed to implementing many identical projects, without much co-ordination either among the inter-State organs themselves, or between them

on the one hand, and the ECA on the other. In consequence of the resulting duplication in programmes of work, there has been needless competition in the claims on the resources of the different countries required for participation in the various projects, and in many instances, in the demands for the complementary external resources.

10. To introduce some order into the situation, the Executive Committee has recommended that the sub-regions be redivided into seven of approximately equal sizes, and that each be made the basis of formal inter-State co-operative institutions. To this end, it is further urged that "consultations be undertaken to determine in what ways the inter-governmental organizations could be expanded and strengthened to cater for sub-regional economic co-operation. The work programme of ECA and that of the inter-governmental organizations should (then) be co-ordinated, in order to ensure more effective and efficient development of the new sub-regions."^{1/}

11. The two missions sent out to the West and the Central African sub-regions between March and July 1970, with the foregoing terms of reference, however, discovered that the countries concerned and their respective inter-governmental groupings were not prepared yet to accept any proposals for rationalizing their groupings within the framework of the newly demarcated sub-regions. On the other hand, they welcomed an increase in the number of ECA field offices, which would mean that the average country could enjoy easier access to ECA's technical assistance facilities. The Executive Committee, while taking note of these reactions, recommended that the manpower and financial resources of the existing sub-regional offices should be strengthened, before additional offices were created. The new proposal to establish multinational inter-disciplinary development advisory groups (UNDATs) has therefore been hailed by all as a timely addition to the technical assistance resources customarily expected to be placed at the disposal of the ECA sub-regional offices.

^{1/} Report of the Second Meeting of the Executive Committee, ECA, E/CN.14/462, para. 150.

12. One of the conclusions that emerge distinctly from the reports of the two economic co-operation missions is that the African countries are as yet unready to abandon their older, smaller groupings with limited objectives in favour of new ones, somewhat larger in membership and more ambitious in their immediate objectives. Though no similar missions have been sent out to the remaining sub-regions, consultations carried out by the sub-regional office Directors have yielded much the same conclusions. It will be some time before larger, inter-governmental organizations with fully fledged consultative organs characterize the African economic scene. Their emergence could be by way of new groupings being established to take over the functions of some existing ones. Alternatively, some existing groupings could expand membership, and where necessary, enlarge their objectives. At the same time, single-purpose, inter-governmental organizations are being set up to cater for the interests of neighbouring countries in specially selected fields, as in the case of the West African Rice Development Association recently set up by fourteen countries. In all these ways, the influence of the sub-regional concept on planning and action within the continent cannot be ignored, although it has not been allowed to prevent the establishment of geographically smaller or wider groupings wherever the needs of the interested States so warrant.

13. While, therefore, the sub-regional basis for co-operation is widely recognized as a possible logical step on the road to African economic unity, the approach to the same ultimate goal is now entirely pragmatic, being characterized by diverse types of association of different sizes, for a great variety of purposes. The tapestry is indeed rich, but as it takes full shape, the challenges, as well as the opportunities thus presented to ECA, become even more urgent. It has a major role to play by maintaining its responsibility for designing rational development strategies and the necessary programmes for the continent, as well as for multinational groupings, whether or not these are coterminous with the sub-regions. It should then be easier to ensure that the programmes of the various groupings fit into, and are consistent with the larger design. In this way, too, the special measures required for securing attention for the interests of the least developed areas could receive full scope. For all these purposes, ECA's technical

assistance service should be carried close to the inter-governmental groupings through permanently resident sub-regional inter-disciplinary teams.

C. Policy proposals for institutional development for economic co-operation

14. The main policy implications for ECA and its member States from the foregoing are as follows:

- (a) ECA should provide efficient bases from where the drive towards multinational co-operative deliberation, planning and action could be initiated or stimulated and kept on course. From such locations, it could make available to these groupings in a permanent manner and in the closest possible proximity to them, teams of personnel representing the major disciplines, primarily in the form of enormously strengthened sub-regional offices. With the assistance of the proposed multinational inter-disciplinary development advisory teams (UNDATs), the groupings could pursue negotiations in regard to the sharing of development opportunities and integration benefits in general, including the offer of preferential treatment to the economically less developed countries, with a greater degree of impartiality. These technical assistance sources could also provide the required encouragement and sustained stimulation to lead to the necessary inter-governmental initiatives.
- (b) ECA should, primarily, through the sub-regional offices, and with the assistance of UNDATs, retain the initiative in formulating development strategies for the continent, and working out their implications for inter-governmental groupings. It should play a similar leading role in identifying multinational projects that, wherever economically justifiable, transcend the boundaries of the existing groupings. It should then keep up its campaign to obtain recognition by groupings and neighbouring non-member States of the advantages of the indicated co-operative actions by them and assist them throughout the necessary negotiations. To permit the maximum exploitation of the opportunities for multinational co-operative partnerships, ECA will have energetically to promote

flexible arrangements whereby a variety of institutional machinery are designed for different multinational groupings of countries for diverse co-operative purposes. As would be readily recognized, this entails the encouragement of the simplest type of co-operative enterprise, with institutional machinery that makes the least demands on sovereignty, wherever the time does not appear to be ripe for the sophisticated forms of co-operation, or wherever the general nature of the subject warrants.

- (c) An essential condition for the avoidance of duplication between ECA's programmes of work and priorities and those of the inter-governmental groupings is that there shall be maximum consultation with them in the formulation of ECA's own. Such consultation would be facilitated by the proximity of ECA to the groupings through the sub-regional offices and UNDATs. In this process the opportunity would present itself for ascertaining the interests of non-members of the groupings too, and making due provision for them. At that stage of consultation, ECA could also draw the members of groupings and non-members together well in advance on projects of common interest. Such consultations should, in time, constitute the first stage in the preparation of the ECA programme of work and priorities. The sub-regional offices could assist in preventing serious divergencies between the groupings' programmes and ECA's, as well as among those of the groupings themselves. The ECA programme of work and priorities could then become a composite of those of all the inter-governmental groupings. The links required to connect general continental development objectives could then be forged by ECA itself.
- (d) ECA should, however, surrender to the multinational co-operative groupings themselves the initiative and responsibility for organizing and financing the high-level inter-governmental meetings, and conferences hitherto exercised by ECA. It should be noted in this regard that some of the busiest inter-governmental groupings maintain

conference calendars that currently exceed ECA's each year. Such a tendency needs every encouragement, as it constitutes a vigorous expression of the virtue of self-reliance. Moreover, many of these meetings deal with the sort of subjects to the examination of which ECA could make a significant contribution, were it permitted by its own busy meeting schedules to do so. In the present circumstances, any attempt to assist extensively in this manner results in the diversion of ECA resources to unscheduled, unapproved projects, and the corresponding postponement of the implementation of those projects approved by the Commission.

- (e) While it is itself expected to run a reduced number of conferences, ECA would need to maintain its present role in the conduct of training courses, seminars and workshops. There is still insufficient activity in these areas on the part of the inter-governmental groupings, and the need for full ECA assistance to them in this regard, further strengthens the argument for reducing the pressure of conferences on its resources. The wide gaps in these fields are naturally for ECA to fill, while it helps the inter-governmental organizations to raise the efficiency of their own seminars and training courses, and assists in making their facilities available to others who are precluded by the mere fact of non-membership. In addition, as recently recommended by the Expert Team on the Evaluation of ECA's Training Programme, Policy and Priorities in Relation to Africa's Manpower Needs, there is need for the co-ordination of programmes here too and ECA's responsibility in this is clear, as it concerns not only the inter-governmental groupings, but also other agencies within the United Nations System.
- (f) ECA should discontinue taking the initiative in constructing all-embracing multi-purpose inter-governmental consultative machinery and associated civil service structures on the sub-regional scale. Since ECA's work on economic co-operation is expected to produce concrete results only after inter-governmental negotiations have

led to agreed decisions to implement the relevant recommendations, the convening of the required meetings for such negotiation and decision-taking would best be left to these inter-governmental groupings themselves.

- (g) A problem that arises from the foregoing is that of ensuring that the non-members of the groupings that stand to benefit by closer association with the groupings concerned would in fact be able to reap such benefits. This is a matter that depends mainly on both parties, and the association principle will need to be judiciously exploited for the purpose. This is essential, since on the basis of experience in the past decade, save in exceptional cases, the multinational organizations seem to work best on their own initiative in regard to the sort of deliberations that call for the acceptance by governments of commitments for co-operation. It is fully recognized that, often the alternative of conducting such discussions and negotiations under the ECA banner could more readily draw in all the interested States. However, this has not always produced the desired results in ensuring purposeful inter-governmental negotiations and resulting action, and may be used only in deserving cases.