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Independent Review of Decentralized Offices Network - Addendum to Annex 11

Addendum to Annex 11

Asia and the Pacific

Comments of the Team Leader for the Evaluation of the Decentralized Offices in Asia and the Pacific (RAP)

1. Overall, the 'Review of FAO office coverage' is an excellent paper with a comprehensive treatment on the issue FAO office coverage outside of headquarters. As the team leader of the evaluation of FAO's decentralization initiatives in the Asia and the Pacific region, I had the opportunity to assess the functioning of FAO regional and country presence in the region. In that context I reviewed substantial volumes of FAO's corporate documentation on recent organizational policy reforms, strategic planning process and decentralization initiatives including FAO office coverage in the different regions. This paper managed to bring together a complex set of issues involving FAO's office coverage in a coherent structure, presented in a clear and succinct manner. Given that the objective of the paper is to provide a substantive basis for deliberation and decision making on an issue which has larger implications for the organization, I consider that it serves that purpose very well with balanced perspective and analysis, professional objectivity and charting a pragmatic set of options for the future.

My brief comments below follow the structure of the paper.

Section 1. Introduction:

2. The introduction places the issue of FAO coverage in a dynamic context of organizational reform and the pressures on the organization emanating from the emerging realities of its member countries. The competing demands of the mandated normative responsibilities of the organization and the increasing demand for technical, programmatic and operational support from its membership has pushed the organization to a develop an integrated framework of organizational results which emphasizes convergence between the twin dimensions of FAO's

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work. The issue of regional, sub regional and country coverage is an integral element of the reform initiatives to deliver results based on an unified organizational results framework.

3. The introduction section should underline the changing and differentiated nature of demands from countries with varying characteristics and, sometimes, demands to offer technical assistance in more complex new areas where FAO itself is gaining maturity. The traditional comparative advantage of multilateral organizations like FAO are facing the challenges of constrained resources, competition from expanding specialized knowledge in private sector, increasing access to different knowledge sources by member country institutions, waning of the old style expert-based technical cooperation. The developing countries demand a higher level of contemporary knowledge, expertise and capacity to expeditiously deal with their development issues. The expectation level is higher in terms of quality, speed and problem solving capacity of support.
4. The importance of appropriate coverage structure is rightly emphasized in this section, but coverage through appropriate structure is only a necessary condition. In order to be effective in performance, coverage structure must be complemented with devolution of decision making, delegation of authority supported by and appropriate substantive, technical and managerial capacities.

Sections 2 and 3. Current coverage and Characterization of Country Offices:

5. These two sections supported by the 10 annexes are very useful. The factual presentation of the current coverage in section 2 indeed provides a complete view of the present status of office coverage. The analysis presented in section 3 on the characterization of country offices following some important operational criteria such as volume of programme delivery, value of total budget, staff cost (both long term and NSHR), and transaction count provide a deeper insight into the profile of the offices from different angles. The set of annexes (4-10) containing indicators related to characteristics of the countries bring forth information and analysis which have critical bearing on future policy on coverage. This set of annexes is indeed very well thought through, optimally packaged and, if updated periodically, would serve as important continuing reference for any future deliberation on decentralization and office coverage issues .

Section 4. Key coverage elated observations:

6. This section captured separately the main findings and recommendations relating to the FAO coverage in all the regions including the Asia-Pacific region. In the RAP evaluation the FAO coverage level in countries of Asia and Pacific was considered to be generally adequate. The evaluation made some specific recommendations on coverage specifically on the Pacific Sub-regional Office (SAP) which has been captured in this paper accurately. This section mentions issues relating to Pacific issues alone which may seem lopsided and give a wrong sense that the rest of Asia need to changes in coverage. The issues of coverage in Asia at large pertain less to changes in physical coverage but more to issues of effectiveness, efficiency and quality of response by the country offices. The readers of the paper should have an understanding of this aspect while considering the issue of coverage for the entire region.
7. In this regard, there are a number of recommendations relating to making the existing coverage in Asia more effective. These include improving the predictability and timeliness of technical support from RAP to country offices. The report makes a case for equipping RAP with adequate number of technical specialist to enable it to respond to country office technical needs expeditiously. The other qualifying comment which has bearing on effectiveness and efficiency of the country coverage of FAO services in Asia-Pacific deals more on devolution and delegation. This has been captured in the evaluation as follows:

‘ in the view of the Evaluation: ‘FAO has made progress in transferring responsibilities from HQ to RAP, but disproportionately less so beyond this to the country level’. There are no

doubts that country offices have seen their independence increase quite substantially over time, through greater delegation of authority in procurement, recruitment, priority-setting, etc. Nevertheless, quoting one informant, "There is a perception that the push to decentralize and delegate from Rome has resulted in convergence and recentralization in Bangkok." And indeed, as evidence in the report shows, for a number of processes and procedures, RAP appears to be playing more a role of 'Central Control', and much less of enabling and connecting element between the country level and HQ.'

This is a relevant finding the spirit of which should be kept in view while considering the coverage issues.

Section 5. Criteria for Adjusting Coverage:

8. Drawing from the analysis of office coverage based on different indicators and the recommendations of the five regional evaluations provides, this section generated a number of general criteria and location specific characteristics which define the lowest common denominators in deciding on the office coverage. I agree with all the criteria for change as presented in this section.
9. The prerequisite characteristics for location of Regional and Sub-regional offices as stated in this section are fully rational and practical. It is difficult to disagree with the reasoning.
10. I agree with the overarching imperative mentioned in this section that any decision for changing FAO's coverage should be guided by three core objectives i) optimizing FAO's ability to deliver services at its best in a cost effective manner, ii) achieving results of the Strategic Framework, and iii) recognizing right of access of any member country to FAO services.
11. Optimizing FAO country level coverage would require application of a combination of variable characteristics which reflect the realities of the member countries. Priority consideration for coverage should be based on expenditure (particularly funded by assessed contributions), potential for best delivery of results, consideration for low income and lower MICs, Special set of considerations will be applied to countries with high voluntary contributions and clustering coverage countries with small programmes under single office coverage.
12. Finally, it is important to review the coverage periodically. The coverage should be considered in a dynamic national, sub-regional and regional context. The organization need to develop a nimble approach to adjust the coverage in creative ways rather than waiting for large organizational reform initiatives. Internal efficiency gains achieved through decentralization, devolution and delegation of authority can improve quality and depth of coverage. A more proactive approach to assess country demand systematically, and harnessing and managing organizational knowledge and human resources more smartly would help supplement the FAO coverage efforts better.

Section 6. Options for change in the Asia- Pacific Region:

13. The concluding chapter charts out certain options for change. It correctly identifies the drivers, both external and internal, that are likely to affect the international cooperation context and will affect FAO's business model at country level. This also underlines the criticality of country presence and need for sustained interaction and dialogue with member countries.
14. I fully endorse the following general proposals made in the paper for change which are underway in all regions.

“Given the high degree of variability among country offices, a general proposal is to recognize the degree of management complexity and responsibility of specific country offices, and differentiate management decisions on grades and staffing of country offices accordingly. For those countries above a given level of delivery, such as above USD 8 million used in the tables, the offices will be eligible for special consideration. Below a given level, such as below delivery of USD 1 million, with due consideration for other responsibilities of some offices as discussed above, some of these low-delivery countries made need to come under multiple accreditation, losing their resident FAO Representative, or make other management decisions regarding the level of staffing of the office.

- *Another option for these countries may be to downgrade the post of a new FAORs with preference given to experienced national Assistant FAOR Representatives as they transition to international staff responsibilities. A further option may be to send existing technical staff as FAORs but who will work primarily as technical officers, linked to the subregional multidisciplinary team, while hopefully building up the country programme. This outposting could be for longer or shorter periods of time, depending on the needs of a given country. This arrangement differs from the former Outposted Technical Officers who, in spite of their title, generally provided little support to other countries as technical officers, concentrating on their work as FAORs. Given the low volume of work in a number of countries where donor interest is also low, this alternative arrangement may offer promise, provided the technical officers are sufficiently engaged and connected to the technical network of the region and subregion.*
 - *Another more general change, Subregional Coordinators have recently been given the responsibility of supervising the FAORs in their area of coverage. This had been the case in a more informal way for Africa, given the large number of FAORs in the Region, but never formalized. As discussed below, the proposed FAOR for Papua New Guinea would report to the Subregional Coordinator for the Pacific, along with the proposed outposting of one or more SAP subregional officers, who will operate from that office.*
 - *Another more general change is to prioritize country presence and Regular Programme support in Low-Income Food Deficit countries on one hand, and to rely increasingly on cost sharing for offices in high or upper-middle-income countries. This is already the case in some countries with high volumes of Unilateral Trust Funds, mainly in Latin America as highlighted below, but can be expanded. Similarly, in terms of the impact of climate change, the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and particularly those in the Pacific require special priority.*
 - *In all cases, there must be flexibility and timeliness in size and scope of presence, taking into consideration economic status of the country, the presence or likelihood of crisis situations, the location and strength of other partners.*
15. I also fully agree with the rationale for changes as well as the specific proposals for change for the Asia-Pacific region as captured in the following text of the paper. This is quite comprehensive and covers all recommendations made in the evaluation of the Asia and the Pacific region:

“A number of the desired characteristics discussed above are evident in the FAO offices in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok is the airline hub of the region, it is home to ESCAP, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and hosts other UN agencies’ regional offices. The network of country offices is well established, with a broad range of delivery volumes and other characteristics that appear appropriate to the country contexts. The office in Apia, Samoa (SAP) services a clearly defined sub region.

Several country offices have been strengthened in recent years, to a large extent in line with suggestions in the decentralization evaluation of this region. This includes adding assessed contribution-funded international staff in Papua New Guinea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Mongolia, as described earlier. National-level Assistant FAO Representatives were provided for two countries (Tonga and Vanuatu) and the host country agreements have now been finalized to place an AFAOR in each of Fiji and Solomon Islands. Discussions are underway with the Republic of Korea and Malaysia to open a Partnership and Liaison Offices.

As highlighted in the Asia and Pacific decentralization evaluation, however, coverage is a significant challenge in the Pacific, given the number of countries in the subregion (14) and the enormous geographical area that it covers. This also places considerable strain on the staff based in Samoa. Adjustments in the subregion remain the top priority, as they were in the regional evaluation.

Revamping the Subregional office's skill mix is part of a wider coverage and capacity exercise. An additional post for Economics and Statistics was added in the 2016-17 PWB and an additional P-5 fisheries post was recently created, with a staff member moving on mobility from headquarters. A further fisheries officer from headquarters will soon be moving to Samoa and other changes will follow, including new posts on Gender and Resilience. The overall skills mix changes, while vital for the subregional programme, are dealt with separately and not part of the coverage proposals per se.

By the end of 2015, FAO will have a physical presence in six countries in the Pacific subregion (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga). This represents a presence in all four Melanesian countries (the first four listed) and two of the six Polynesian countries (Samoa and Tonga) but no presence in the five Micronesia countries (Marshall Islands, Nauru, Kiribati, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia).

Papua New Guinea has clear links to both Asia and the Pacific and is expected to play a larger role in providing support to smaller countries. It is already supporting mangrove restoration in Samoa, Tuvalu and Tonga and has recently announce a new USD 150 million programme to support Pacific countries. It is also significantly closer to some of the SAP countries.

In light of the above, the proposed options for the Pacific are:

- Upgrade the FAO office in Papua New Guinea to a fully-fledged FAOR.*
- Have the FAOR PNG accredited to the nearby countries of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. This would be the first instance of reducing the number of accredited countries in the Pacific covered by the Sub regional Coordinator, a recommendation of the Asia and Pacific Evaluation that has so far not been acted upon. The FAOR PNG would report to the SAP sub regional coordinator, as in other sub regions.*
- Outpost a SAP Forestry to Papua New Guinea and consider doing the same for a Fisheries officer, depending on demand.*
- To overcome the isolation of the North Pacific, it is proposed to create the post of Assistant FAOR (Programme) in one of the Micronesia countries who would provide at least desk support for Palau and the Marshall Islands. One option would be for the AFAOR to be co-located with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) sub office in the Federated States of Micronesia."*

16. In conclusion, I find the paper a valuable addition to FAO's documentation on the office coverage. More importantly, it has provided a balanced analysis of various dimensions of the complex issue based on empirical data and findings of the five regional evaluations. No doubt, it would provide an objective and substantive basis for policy discussion at the highest level of FAO.

Europe and Central Asia

Comments of the Team Leader for the Evaluation of the Decentralized Offices in Europe and Central Asia (REU)

1. Section 3 of the paper, on the Characteristics of Country Offices, is a most welcome addition, in that the information provided in the various tables and annexes gives a much broader and more nuanced picture of the many factors affecting the links between the FAO Member States and the Secretariat as incarnated in the regional, sub-regional and country offices. The great diversity of these factors, and the different ways they have evolved over the last half-century, inevitably lead to the conclusion that the location, structure and scope of these offices cannot be considered to be fixed forever, and that these elements need to be "reviewed periodically, perhaps every other biennium" as proposed in the final sentence of the third paragraph of section 6 Options.
2. The summary of the evaluation of the Regional, Sub-regional and Country office in Europe and Central Asia, on pages 10-12 of the paper, accurately reflects the various observations and considerations made by the evaluation team. [There are some small discrepancies in the numbering of the points: there are two paragraphs numbered "iv.", of which the second should presumably become "v."; there is an unnecessary "vi." at the end of the first line of the last bullet point in para. vi; and para. xiv. has somehow become para. "Siv."] On re-reading these observations and considerations one is struck that they remain valid and relevant, and that some subsequent developments in the region confirm the judicious careful phrase in the first para of section 6.3 that "the ideal configuration of the regional and sub-regional offices to carry this out is less clear and there are competing options that offer advantages and disadvantages."
3. The evaluation team is delighted that FAO Management has acted quickly and effectively in appointing international FAORs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and that full agreement has been reached on new Partnership and Liaison Offices in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. The proposal to upgrade the office in Uzbekistan to have an international FAOR is warmly welcomed. It is also good news that a Liaison Office is to be established in Moscow.
4. It would be interesting to learn whether the former National Correspondent Scheme has in fact been discontinued.
5. It seems that the phrasing concerning the Regional Office in Budapest ("maintain it as the base for the Regional Office") with a possible posting of one or more officers to other offices within the region reflects an approach similar to those being proposed for the Regional Offices in Accra and Santiago de Chile. This would seem practical and judicious.
6. Finally, the approach outlined in the final sentence of option 1 ("it would be prudent ... in relation to REU and SEC") appears very appropriate and one hopes this will be endorsed at all levels of the consultations by Member States.