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CONFERENCE

Thirty-ninth Session

Rome, 6-13 June 2015

Synthesis of Evaluations of FAO Regional and Subregional Offices

Executive Summary

At its 149th Session the Council "stressed the importance of a forward looking synthesis report of the five evaluations of Regional and Subregional Offices, to be submitted to the Conference in 2015 through the Council".

The present document provides the executive summary while the detailed report can be consulted at: <http://www.fao.org/evaluation/oed-home/en/>.

Suggested action by the Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees, the Council and the Conference

- The Joint Meeting is invited to review the present report, along with management views, and offer comments as deemed appropriate.
- The Council is invited to review the report and management views, and offer guidance and comments as deemed appropriate, in particular on the three recommendations contained in the report.
- The Conference is invited to note the report, management views and the report of the Council, and to provide any guidance deemed appropriate.

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Background and methodology

ES 1. This report contains a synthesis of the five evaluations of Regional and Subregional Offices carried out over the period 2009-2013. It was prepared by the Office of Evaluation in late 2014 at the request made by the Programme Committee at its November 2012 session. It is to be discussed by the Joint Meeting of the Programme and Finance Committees and the Council in March 2015, and presented to the Conference in June 2015.

ES 2. This synthesis, to be forward looking and in consideration of its use, focused on the following three questions of strategic interest to the Members and Management.

- A. Has the decentralization process led to better response to country needs in terms of country coverage?
- B. Have the priority-setting, programming and delivery mechanisms adapted to the needs of a more decentralized FAO?
- C. Has the capacity of decentralized offices improved to service the needs of Members through decentralized operations?

ES 3. This synthesis in principle relied on information and findings contained in the five evaluations of the Regional and Subregional Offices. Because these evaluations have been undertaken at different times from 2009 to 2013, some information was updated for the purpose of comparability among the regions. This was also a period when the decentralization was accelerated and a number of policy and structural changes were introduced, having made some findings of the five evaluations obsolete. Therefore, a fresh round of document reviews, as well as interviews and a survey of internal stakeholders were undertaken to validate or update the findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

ES 4. Overall, the synthesis found that progress has been made over time, towards a more inclusive and harmonized management model across the whole Organization, from headquarters to the country offices. The challenge still remains: finding the right balance between global and local needs and expectations of 197 Members, who are the shareholders of a knowledge organization with normative and operational mandates over a wide range of technical sectors in a continuously changing world.

A. Has the decentralization process led to better response to country needs in terms of country coverage?

ES 5. The evaluations have found progress in the servicing of country needs in general, for some countries in Central Asia and Central America in particular. Such progress has been reflected in an increased field programme delivery, and a greater appreciation and demand by government counterparts and partners for FAO products and services. Factors that have contributed to this include: the expansion of the decentralized office network with presence in more countries, transformation of National Correspondents into Assistant FAO Representatives, and of Technical Officers/FAO Representatives into fully-fledged FAO Representatives; and improved selection process of FAO Representatives.

ES 6. With respect to the overall network structure, there were no unique and best locations identified for Regional and Subregional Offices. Nevertheless, it was found that, in

some cases, historical reasons prevailed, having led to inefficiency in the travel to countries where most of the work was carried out and ineffectiveness in coordination and collaboration with partners. UN Women provides an example of a systematic approach to decide on the locations.

ES 7. At the same time, many Members are rapidly changing their expectations and needs. This should be factored in when planning the location of Regional and Subregional Offices and over the medium and long-term. In this context, the function of Representations in higher income and upper middle income countries were also questioned.

Conclusion 1: Enhancements to the FAO decentralized office network since 2010 has led to improved services to its Member Countries. Questions remain on location of some Regional and Subregional Offices, as well as on the adequacy of host country arrangements in high and upper middle income countries.

Recommendation 1: To FAO Member Countries and Management

FAO Member Countries and Management should consider reviewing the types and coverage of Representation in countries and the location of Regional and Subregional Offices. If agreed to move forward, discuss a set of criteria to guide the process.

B. Have the priority-setting and programming mechanisms adapted to the needs of more decentralized FAO?

ES 8. Some recent process improvements and reform initiatives at the corporate level, not always directly linked to the decentralization process, have started to positively influence the coherence among global, regional and country programmes. The Regional Conferences now play an important role in corporate priority setting. The Regional Representatives have been more present in corporate decision-making processes. At a more technical level, focal points in Regional and Subregional Offices have been involved since early 2013 in the formulation and planning process for the work plans for the Strategic Objectives. Such involvement have allowed for a better understanding of the new concepts included in the reviewed Strategic Framework, and a more robust guidance at regional level, for example through the Regional Initiatives. At the same time, some missed opportunities were identified to increase the involvement of country offices in the priority-setting process, suggesting that national priorities may not have been fully reflected into the process.

ES 9. At country level, significant progress in improving the coherence of country programmes had been made through the adoption of the Country Programming Frameworks. Its systematic roll-out from 2012 onwards provided an opportunity for enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of the work of the Organization, identifying synergies and developing partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders, in alignment with regional and global priorities. Work has progressively started to ensure the alignment of Country Programming Frameworks with the reviewed Strategic Framework, especially at the time of conducting annual or mid-term reviews of Country Programming Frameworks. This should be encouraged as it is fundamental for ensuring sustained coherence between corporate objectives and country programmes and relevance to the countries' own development plans.

ES 10. The quality of Country Programming Frameworks was found quite uneven in such aspects as: situational analysis, results framework, gender mainstreaming, estimation of resource requirements and associated resource mobilization action plans. A stronger and

earlier engagement and support from various corporate technical levels would be needed to strengthen them.

Conclusion 2: While aligning priorities at the corporate, regional and country levels remains a challenge, process improvements and reform initiatives have strengthen their coherence. There is still room for improving the quality of Country Programming Frameworks and the coherence of the corporate and national priorities through Country Programming Frameworks.

Recommendation 2: To FAO Management

FAO Management should take further measures to improve the quality and effectiveness of Country Programming Frameworks, as well as their coherence with corporate priorities across all countries. For this, a stronger and earlier engagement and support from various levels of the Organization would be needed.

C. Has the capacity of decentralized offices improved to service the needs of Members through decentralized operations?

ES 11. Since 2010, operational responsibility has been transferred to the decentralized offices and the Lead Technical Officer responsibility in the 2012-2013 biennium, having brought FAO closer to its clients. Core resources and professional posts have steadily increased in decentralized offices over the last decade, to cater for the new and strengthened offices and following the transfer of management responsibilities. These trends and measures, together with improved selection process of FAO Representatives, have enhanced the capacity of many decentralized offices to provide more timely and relevant assistance.

ES 12. Nevertheless, decentralization necessarily meant spreading the resources thin across the globe. Concern remains on technical capacities of decentralized offices. Technical support and backstopping of field programme in countries were not always forthcoming from Regional and Subregional Offices, often due to capacity issues. This is not only in quantitative terms. Achieving the high level of technical expertise and the right skill mix remains a challenge for decentralized offices. To strategically plan and identify most appropriate profiles of technical staff in Regional and Subregional Offices requires further understanding of the technical support roles between Headquarters and Regional and Subregional Offices.

ES 13. Vacancies and the use of “non-staff human resources” provide necessary flexibility to adjust the skill mix during the decentralization process and in face of financial unpredictability. For this, vacancies should be proactively managed and should not be the result of process inefficiencies as seen in some cases. The decentralized offices rely heavily on non-staff human resources. FAO was found not always an attractive employer in the local market for highly-skilled employees in this category, making it difficult to attract and retain highly skilled human resources. Decentralized offices need to be more empowered to manage the levels and the mix of staff skills in the local context, especially those in non-stable contracts.

ES 14. Resource mobilization for the field programme still remains a challenge for decentralized office, and particularly so in some regions. Further support to decentralized offices, such as through enhanced networks of intelligence on resource mobilization opportunities and learning initiatives on resource mobilization, would be needed.

ES 15. In recent times FAO has been more active in capturing the opportunities offered by the growth in the number of governments interested and willing to collaborate with FAO with their own financial resources or through South-South Cooperation. Given that South-South Cooperation involves more than one country, pro-active and coordinated support from Headquarters and Regional Offices would be useful.

Conclusion 3: Technical and financial capacity in decentralized offices has increased overtime and it has helped to provide more timely and relevant assistance. The progress has been uneven among the regions however, and the challenge remains in achieving desirable levels and mix of skills, and in resource mobilization.

Recommendation 3: To FAO Management

FAO Management should take measures to further facilitate and empower decentralized offices to achieve desirable levels and skill mix of their human resources, taking into account local contexts, and to further facilitate and support their resource mobilization efforts.