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ESCWA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
EVALUATION OF ESCWA
PUBLICATIONS

PUBLICATION PERIOD: 2014-2015

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Executive Summary

Facilitated by the Strategy, Evaluation and Partnership Section (StEPS), this evaluation assessed selected publications according to the criteria of content, relevance and process. The evaluation's key focus was on the quality of ESCWA's 2014-15 publications, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this final report is to offer forward-looking recommendations on improving the quality of ESCWA publications and to be a learning tool that provides guidance and lessons learnt.

The evaluation was divided into two phases, undertaken between July and December 2016. The first phase consisted of a desk review of 41 publications that were assessed against 18 criteria for content and relevance (quantified on a scale from 1-3, for a total possible score of 54 points). The first phase concluded with a scored matrix against which the 41 publications were measured. The scoring of individual publications was confidential, and analysis focused on identifying broad trends in ESCWA publications. The second phase of the evaluation focused on assessing the process for publications, from conceptualization to implementation. An in-depth assessment was undertaken of five publications, and a total of 19 interviews and one focus group were conducted to validate findings and to explore forward-looking mechanisms to enhance the quality of ESCWA publications.

Overall ESCWA publications were found to be relevant to the needs of the region, issued in a timely manner and citing respected sources, with good outreach to key experts in the field. Moreover, ESCWA authors demonstrated pride in their work, and all ESCWA staff provided many suggestions for ways to further improve the quality of ESCWA's publications, indicating their positive engagement in the process. However, the evaluation also found areas of concern in ESCWA publications, and six key findings were identified to improve the quality of publications:

- 1) ESCWA publications do not systematically promote policy change because they often have very broad or vague target audiences, and weak policy recommendations.
- 2) ESCWA's ability to promote regional development issues in its publications may be jeopardized as most publications are not fully engendered.
- 3) Existing quality assurance mechanisms suffer from ineffective working modalities that are not directly improving quality.
- 4) ESCWA publications indicate over-dependence on quantitative methodologies, in a region where quality and accurate statistical data is hard to locate.
- 5) Many of ESCWA's publications offer unique analysis, however such contributions to the literature are not often clearly identified, weakening the impact of the publication.
- 6) ESCWA publications do not consistently comply with UN standards for publication in terms of readability and formatting.

The report concludes with lessons learnt and recommendations to enable ESCWA to: develop a shared understanding of the policy objectives of publications, better integrate a gender component, enhance quality assurance mechanisms, diversify sources and types of data, enhance analysis, and better comply with UN standards for publications.

Lesson 1: Policy recommendations can be strengthened with clearly defined policy objectives and specified target audience(s).

Recommendation: Link target audience to clearly defined policy objective

- Develop guidelines that help authors to segment target audiences and develop recommendations for each targeted audience or group of audiences.
- Strategically plan more time for developing policy recommendations and getting insights from policy makers on draft recommendations.
- Include a statement indicating a specific targeted audience at the beginning of the publication.

Lesson 2: ESCWA publications would benefit from additional gender mainstreaming at an earlier planning stage.

Recommendation: Ensure gender and a rights-based approach are mainstreamed in all ESCWA publications

- Draw on qualitative insights on gender issues within publications to complement gaps in statistical data on women issues in the region.
- Involve the Division's gender focal point early on in the process of conceptualizing and drafting a publication.
- Ensure a gender parity component in EGM and peer review guidelines.

Lesson 3: ESCWA's quality assurance mechanisms, internal and external, require review and revision to more effectively ensure the production of high quality publications.

Recommendation: Strengthen ESCWA's quality assurance mechanisms for publications

- Conduct smaller, more focused EGMs more frequently in the process of writing.
- Develop a roster of independent external reviewers per Division or Section, with the final selection of external reviewers undertaken by the Publications Committee.
- Develop and apply a mechanism to report internal plagiarism.
- Create a mechanism to ensure responsibility of authors to incorporate feedback.
- Rotate members of the Publication Committee to avoid having the same type of feedback from same members.
- Revisit the internal culture of not giving honest and constructive feedback by fostering a safe space.
- Instil a mechanism to ensure Publication Committee members are accountable to read manuscripts under review and provide robust feedback.

Lesson 4: Quantitative data and statistics need to be complemented by other sources of data to more accurately reflect the needs of the region.

Recommendation: Respond more effectively to the needs of the region by diversifying the sources of data to include a greater usage of qualitative and Arabic sources.

- Make better use of qualitative data, case studies and testimonials in reports.
- Clarify modality of working with the Statistics Division and offer clearer guidelines to authors.
- Validate statistics obtained from member States with insights from qualitative field research.

- Arabic sources and content analysis should be used more frequently.

Lesson 5: ESCWA should consistently and clearly reflect its unique contribution within each publication, showing the added value of its work.

Recommendation: Improve publication's quality and articulation of analysis so ESCWA's contribution to the literature is clear

- Ensure clarity in policy objectives so that analysis feeds into quality recommendations.
- Integrate feedback of peer reviewers on analysis and contribution to literature.
- Provide guidelines on how to highlight analytical contributions.
- Work with external readers to identify how best to point to analysis and key findings.

Lesson 6: Adhering to UN standards for publications will ensure the content is readable and accessible to an external audience.

Recommendation: Ensure ESCWA publications comply with UN and ESCWA standards

- Institutionalize mechanism for compliance with UN and ESCWA standards for publications.
- Make executive summaries mandatory to all publications¹.
- Allow more time for stylistic and editorial improvements.
- Apply standard formatting of tables and graphs to all ESCWA publications.
- Build the capacity of authors and co-authors through writing workshops.

¹ Excepting those publications with pre-determined structures that preclude executive summaries