



Evaluation Brief

The Social Development Subprogramme



ESCWA

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Background

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) promotes the economic and social development of the Arab region through regional cooperation and integration. In line with this mission, the Social Development Division (SDD), one of seven ESCWA sub-programmes, seeks to enhance the capacity of Member States to adopt and implement rights-based social policies that promote social justice and equitable, inclusive and participatory socio-economic development.

SDD is primarily responsible for undertaking social policy research and analysis, monitoring social development trends in the region, serving intergovernmental bodies, informing regional and global processes, acting as a platform for the exchange of knowledge, building the capacity of Member States to implement sound social development policies, and strengthening partnerships with key stakeholders in furthering social development in the Arab region.

In 2012, ESCWA undertook an internal discretionary evaluation of the SDD sub-programme. A team of independent external evaluators was contracted to conduct the evaluation for the period between 2006 and 2011. The evaluation utilized a standard qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodology for its data collection and analysis, including a desk review, customized surveys, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

Key Findings

The evaluation identified key areas of success that serve as indicators of SDD's accomplishments. It found that the Social Development Division:

- Provided member states with a unique platform to engage in a regional dialogue, network and exchange information. The meetings, workshops, and regional conferences that SDD organized were “directly useful” to the national strategic objectives of Member States on social development.
- Empowered non-governmental and civil society organizations in the region to play a more active role in the development process. In particular, the sub-programme was successful in linking civil society organizations working on development issues with relevant government agencies, creating meaningful relationships and networks.
- Successfully built and strengthened local institutional capacity of Member States in addressing social, economic and political issues. When called upon, SDD provided technical advisory services to Member States that allowed them to benefit from the experiences of others and to identify problems and obstacles that emerged from these experiences.

- Proactively addressed the issues and needs of Member States in a responsive manner. This occurred because the strategic framework and objectives of the sub-programme were closely developed with Member States. Their representatives confirmed that their voices were an integral part of the process that established SDD priorities.

Key Challenges

The evaluation also identified areas that, if addressed, could improve operational efficiency and collaboration with partners. These include:

- Unencumbered, vacant posts within SDD which hindered its ability to expand services.
- Absence of close coordination and communication with the SDD Regional Advisor.
- National focal points who are not qualified and not sufficiently proactive in collaborating and coordinating with SDD.
- A silo-like structure within SDD and ESCWA at large that inhibits interdisciplinary cooperation.

Recommendations

The evaluation emerged with a set of recommendations to SDD that include:

- Strengthen ESCWA's regional and global standing to become the "thought leader" or leading "think-tank" of the region on key social issues.
- Increase participation from civil society organizations in sub-programme activities to support and sustain the region's political and social transitions.

- Mobilize extra budgetary resources to significantly expand SDD programming to meet growing regional demand, especially in light of the uprisings in the Arab world.
- Review hiring protocols for staff and consultants which are currently inhibiting the timely identification and hiring of appropriate personnel.
- Work with other regional commissions (which have developed solid M&E systems) to improve SDD's M&E system as a means to better monitor and capture lessons learned for continued success.
- Clarify the role of the Regional Advisor and establish a more cooperative relationship between the Regional Advisor and the Division.
- Strengthen coordination and collaboration with ESCWA's Centre for Women and other relevant Divisions.

Follow Up

As a result of the recommendations, ESCWA's evaluation managers in conjunction with the Director of SDD developed a two-year action plan addressing the challenges identified. The action plan was signed as a Senior Management compact between the Executive Secretary and the Director of SDD. Progress made in the implementation of the action plan will be tracked by the evaluation managers on a biannual basis.

Some of the key outputs identified in the Action Plan include developing a six year research agenda on at least three regional priorities, implementing joint initiatives with civil society organizations on key social development issues, and developing multi-year project proposals to mobilize additional extrabudgetary funding.