

Review Article

A review and commentary on the U.N. Report, A Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System (Jackson Report). U.N. Publications. Geneva, 1969. No price stated.

by David Owen*

Twenty one years ago the General Assembly of the United Nations, meeting in Paris, voted the sum of U.S. \$350,000 for an experimental programme of technical assistance for, what were then called, underdeveloped countries. At a 'pledging conference' held in New York during the current session of the General Assembly, over a hundred governments 'pledged' voluntary contributions amounting to considerably more than U.S. \$200 millions for the United Nations Development programme in 1970. Forty five governments 'pledged' more for 1970 than they had contributed for 1969, and they numbered among them many small donor-recipient countries as well as big donors. This is a record of increased voluntary financial support which most inter-governmental organisations must envy. What more convincing assurance of satisfaction could possibly be wished for?

Yet this increasing support has been given to a programme of activities which is the subject of a searching and, in some respects, devastating critique in the official UN Report now under review - the "Capacity of the United Nations Development Assistance" to deliver an effective programme of technical co-operation to the developing countries. If there is any contradiction here it calls for an explanation, but this is not far to seek. The Report, written by Sir Robert Jackson (an old UN hand himself) and a team of collaborators (mainly drawn from within the UN system) is an admirable example of institutional self-criticism courageously designed to prepare the way for the changes which are felt to be needed to improve the effectiveness of what is in most respects a very successful programme of international

*Sir David Owen is President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

cooperation. It was commissioned by the Governing Council of UNDP itself, and it has had the support both of governments (developed and developing) and of the international agencies of which the UN system is composed. If Sir Robert, who was exhorted to be 'bold and imaginative', has taken the exhortation to heart, this should not disturb any dovescotes. How splendid it is to have an honest plain-spoken official document, written in breezy English (the forthcoming translation of some of which into French, Spanish and Russian excites no little curiosity), with much to say yea or nay to, but with no failure of faith in the operation under examination.

The Report is contained in two volumes, one thin and quintessential, the other fat and full of interesting particulars. Most readers may well pause for breath after reading Sir Robert's summation of the study's findings and proposals, winding up with an implementation plan for the main recommendations. They should, however, press on to the more formidable volume two, with its nine chapters describing how the various proposals would work in practice. These are divided into three sections: Part II deals with the Character and content of the activities of the UN system in the field of development co-operation (Chapters Two, Three and Four); Part III considers procedures for planning and operating the programme (Chapters Five and Six); and Part IV is concerned with organization, administration and finance (Chapters Seven, Eight, Nine and Ten). A summary of principal recommendations is given, as appropriate, at the end of each chapter. Part V consists of appendices giving the statistical and other background material on which the Report is based. It is a thorough job, on which the authors must surely be congratulated.

It is a merit of the Report that it directs attention to the feature of UNDP which underlies much of the strain and many of the shortcomings (and richness) of the United Nations system of development and assistance.

UN development assistance has in fact been superimposed on an already fast growing system of international co-operation through functional specialised agencies, most of which were not originally conceived as executive bodies with operational responsibilities. Thus the substantial programme of assistance now financed both by UNDP and from regular budgets of the UN and the agencies is implemented through mechanisms grafted on to structures never originally intended for that purpose. In the early days of technical assistance, the modest size and rate of growth of the system permitted many constructive innovations which went some way to resolve the constitutional and operational ambiguities of the system (TAB, the abolition of agency 'shares', the innovation of resident representatives, the beginnings of country programming, centrally administered 'contingency' finance). And the coming of the more amply endowed ~~Special~~ Fund greatly strengthened the central management element in the system, while maintaining the ~~decentralised~~ role of the functional organisations as executive agents. It was not perfect, but it worked reasonably well as an administrative system, increasingly tuned in to the needs of the developing countries, as resident representatives, and various types of agency representatives, learned to work together and with more experienced national government officials. The strain grew and became intolerable only when the fast growth of both the 'constitutional' functions of the agencies and their 'operational' responsibilities outreached the capacity of the system to cope with the load.

While paying tribute to successes of the programme, notably its growing links with investment activities, ~~the Report finds~~ that the present capacity of the system to deliver an effective programme is overstrained, both quantitatively and qualitatively, often seriously so. Delays in approving and executing projects are too long in relation to the urgency of development needs, and the programme delivered does not always respond to the priority requirements of the developing countries or lead to the desired results, particularly as regards investment.

The major causes for these deficiencies - apart from the historical inadequacies of the structure - are the sectoral approach to development problems and the consequent disregard of a comprehensive development policy; the frequent "donor bias" of the co-operation offered and the lack of an adequate UN programming mechanism at the country level which would harmonize all the inputs offered by the system; the lack of effective procedures for implementation and follow-up; and the diffuse organizational pattern at the country, regional and headquarters levels which inhibits both the central policy direction of the programme and an adequate degree of decentralization to the field level, channelled through one focal point.

The writers of the Report are not deterred by this analysis from acknowledging the importance of what is being achieved or from underlining the considerable assets that the UN system possessed which make it ideally suited to meet the expansion of demand which is forecast. They go on to speak of the need to shape an organisation which is able to respond both effectively and flexibly to these changing needs as they arise, and to take fullest advantage of the rapid advances now taking place in science and technology. They advise that there is no time to be lost. The present arrangements must be 'drastically overhauled' along lines which are set out in some detail in the second part of volume two.

What then is proposed to achieve the desired result? An interesting analysis of what is described as a UN Development Co-operation Cycle forms the starting point, together with strong emphasis on the country-centred approach. The cycle embraces all aspects of the process of providing technical co-operation: programming, project formulation, implementation, evaluation and follow-up, these various phases being intimately connected with each other in an integrated process. It is proposed, therefore, that the programming of UN development assistance should be synchronised with the development planning

cycle of each country and should, so far as possible, cover all inputs from the UN system, as well as being closely related to other plans (IBRD's, and surely others') for subsequent investment. Long term exercises of this kind would be supplemented by annual country reviews. The Governing Council would approve country programmes as a whole (not individual projects as is done, perfunctorily, at present). Authority for approving projects would be delegated to the Administrator (and, in some cases, by him again to the resident representatives in the country concerned). Evaluation and follow up implementation are to be taken fully into account from the very inception of each programme or project. Execution would still normally be delegated to the Specialised Agencies, though with more direct control and responsibility on the part of the Administrator than at present. The present overstrain on the agencies would be relieved by contracting outside the system (to consulting firms, professional institutions, University centres, etc.)

To apply these procedures effectively various organisational changes are proposed which reflect not only 'ideal' solutions but the cautious outcome of much consultation. It is strongly urged that sole responsibility within the UN system for technical co-operation and pre-investment should be centred on a strengthened UNDP, working on equal terms with the World Bank, the principal organisation in the UN system in the investment field. It is hoped that a more realistic preparation of country programmes (by resident representatives, assisted by technical advisers rather than agency representatives) would lead to the more expeditious delivery of programmes by stream-lined agencies (and other suitable institutions on an 'ad hoc' basis). It is rightly felt that programme preparation would be greatly assisted if it were carried out with reference to national orders of magnitude (not fixed targets as at present in the programming of technical assistance) within which priorities could be established. The present system of

formal consultation between the Administrator and the executive agencies is rejected in favour of a Technical Advisers Panel attached to UNDP headquarters and through seconded technical officers working full-time or part-time on the resident representatives' staffs. Operational control would, however, rest firmly in the hands of the Administrator, under the policy guidance of the inter-governmental Governing Council. Recognising the dual character of the UN system of international co-operation and developing assistance administration, it is wisely suggested that the overall economic and social policy of the UN system at the secretariat level should be the function of a radically reformed Committee on Administrative Co-ordination.

There is little doubt that changes along these lines would in the fullness of time lead to the more effective management of technical co-operation and pre-investment activities in the UN system, especially if some of the complementary proposals of the study relating to information retrieval, delegation of executive responsibility, and the improvement of personnel standards were also acted upon. The weight of responsibility which it is proposed should fall upon resident representatives does suggest, however, that a radical upgrading of standards will be needed if the new system is to work well. It may be doubted, however, whether the creation of a UN development assistance career service absolutely separate from the rest of the UN and agency regular secretariats, is really desirable. There are, surely, other devices which can be applied through some modification of the existing UN system, which would make it possible to recruit and promote more flexibly, due weight being given to the financial implications of recruitment of certain essential skills and experience on the open market. It must be admitted, however, that if rigidities in the UN system obstruct the recruitment or promotion of men and women of the required calibre for vital executive posts, it will be hard to resist the claim for a separate service for the development assistance.

programme. One can only say 'Amen' to the many practical suggestions for the better preparation, in-service training and briefing of staff which the Report sets out. And there is much food for administrative thought in the Chapters expounding a new financial system designed to serve the procedures proposed in the UN Development Co-operation Cycle; improved budgetary practices; and the better management of supplies, premises and other facilities for the benefit of the system as a whole.

For the present reviewer it is comforting to know that a great deal of what is proposed in this Report has already been the subject of serious discussion and at least partial application by the present management of the Programme, whose awareness of the need for change is implicit in their support of the Jackson study. They will reasonably reject some, but willingly accept many of the practical proposals and suggestions with which this remarkable Report abounds. Some of the more far-reaching proposals will call for courageous action by the heads of the agencies and by the inter-governmental bodies of the UN system which now govern the Programme. A possible time-table of administrative and legislative events has thoughtfully been provided! It is devoutly to be hoped that effective action will follow. Failure to act effectively would be fatal, not only to development aid - for there are many other possible approaches, but to the UN multilateral system examined in this Report. The scarcely veiled possibility of a World Bank 'take over' in the field of pre-investment assistance is probably exaggerated, mainly for political reasons, but it is possible to die by inches.

Nearly every good thing is disappointing in some respects. For the present reviewer the Jackson Report disappoints a little at first reading, mainly on account of its limited approach to the relationship between economic policy and aid. The country programming approach is rightly stressed, but there are many aspects of development which turn on broader strategies than are likely

to emerge from 'country requests'. This is not wholly ignored in the Report but its implications for the system are only lightly touched on. Yet the United Nations system as a whole has much to offer in this respect. The same is true of the difficult subject of regionalisation, concerning which a special supplementary study is wisely recommended. It is to be hoped that functionally defined sub-regional groupings rather than unwieldy continental regions will be the main focus of such a study. To raise these points is, of course, to return to the institutional dichotomy between 'constitutional' and 'operational' responsibilities which has bedevilled the organisation and management of the UN system over the last twenty years. The truth of the matter is that the system as a whole, not merely its development assistance activities, needs a Jackson study.