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MIDTERM REVIEW  
OF THE  
TECHNICAL ADVISORY PROGRAMME

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. This document has been prepared in response to Executive Board decision 2002/3, which requested the Executive Director to submit to the Board at its second regular session in 2004, a report on the findings and recommendations of the midterm review of the UNFPA Technical Advisory Programme (TAP). At its first regular session 2002, the Board endorsed the proposed option for the TAP that shifted the emphasis of the UNFPA Country Technical Services Teams (CSTs) towards more strategic interventions, a greater focus on capacity-building and knowledge sharing, and increased reliance on national and regional human and institutional resources. This option also transformed the arrangement with United Nations partners into a more strategic framework through the strategic partnerships programme. At its annual session 2003, the Board reviewed and took note of the monitoring and evaluation system for the TAP, which includes a midterm review.

### Background

2. The TAP (described in the annex) constitutes the UNFPA strategy to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of its technical support in reproductive health, population and development, and gender. It is also a key element in implementing the strategic direction of the Fund.

3. The TAP is composed of nine multidisciplinary CSTs, each supervised by a director. The composition and technical skills of each CST respond to the specific needs and capacities of the regions and subregions in which they are located. Their primary responsibility is to provide technical support and to develop capacity at the regional and country level. However, the CSTs also provide a field-based regional perspective and undertake knowledge sharing at organizational and regional levels. The nine teams, together with the Technical Support Division at headquarters, constitute the UNFPA technical advisory system, which provides integrated technical support to the UNFPA programming process.

4. The TAP includes the strategic partnerships programme with United Nations partners. This initiative, a results-based partnership developed according to the priorities and comparative advantages of each partner organization, focuses on producing results that will improve the effectiveness of UNFPA programmes.

5. The expected outcomes of the TAP are: (a) increased national and regional capacity to provide technical support for population and development programmes; (b) increased accessibility and use of technical information, including lessons learned, to improve the effectiveness of national population and development programmes; and (c) improved strategic technical support at key stages of the UNFPA programme cycle and in United Nations system-wide processes.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE MIDTERM REVIEW

6. The purpose of the midterm review is to assess whether the TAP adopted a more strategic approach to technical assistance during its first two years of implementation, and whether the new approach has been effective in providing technical assistance. In order to assess the changes brought about by the TAP, the midterm review addressed the following issues:

- (a) Is the TAP contributing to increased regional and national capacity development?

(b) Is the TAP contributing to increased access to and use of technical information, including lessons learned, regional analyses and evidence-based recommendations for policy dialogue?

(c) Is the technical support that the TAP provides to countries strategic in nature?

7. In order to address the above questions, UNFPA collected and analysed information from various sources, including CST annual reports; mission reports from CST advisers; questionnaire responses and interviews with UNFPA Representatives from country offices in all four geographical regions; questionnaire responses from CST directors and advisers in the nine CSTs; and interviews with staff from UNFPA geographical divisions and other divisions at headquarters.

### III. FINDINGS

8. The year 2002 was a transition phase for the TAP, during which UNFPA made important changes in the profiles, competencies and terms of reference of the CST directors and advisers. UNFPA reduced the number of posts from 131 to 78. UNFPA also reassessed all CST staff using the new competency-based interviewing procedures, which were applied for the first time in UNFPA. Forty CST advisers were reconfirmed in their posts and 38 were recruited.

9. UNFPA also redefined the tasks and outputs of teams and advisers to ensure that support to country programmes would be more strategic, in line with the strategic direction of UNFPA. UNFPA also sought to make collaboration with headquarters continuous and efficient, which helped to integrate the CSTs more effectively into the organization. The Fund prepared guidelines to manage the TAP and defined rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures. It also conducted biannual meetings with CST directors. At the same time, UNFPA enhanced the flexibility of the teams to draw upon specialized supplementary technical expertise. In addition, UNFPA developed a framework for the new strategic partnerships programme with United Nations agencies.

10. UNFPA also held planning meetings at the beginning of each year to decide on organizational and regional priorities for technical assistance and to coordinate all CST and UNFPA Technical Support Division work plans. At the end of the year, the Fund conducted joint reviews to assess the level of achievement of the planned results. The TAP monitoring and evaluation framework formed the basis for both exercises.

11. Despite the brief period of operation in 2003 and 2004 of the new TAP programme, it is clear that the system is changing in the intended direction. The changes encompass nearly all aspects of the technical support system, especially with regard to the strategic approach and the work of the CSTs. For example, UNFPA formulated objective criteria to decide on the nature of strategic missions. In addition, the establishment of an objective monitoring and evaluation framework facilitated a shift from an activity-based approach to a results-based approach.

12. Reports and interviews from the field suggest that efforts are being made to adopt a more effective approach to technical assistance. The CSTs are moving away from demand-driven and project-oriented technical support towards more strategic mission and non-mission support focused on capacity-building, regional and institutional-level analyses, and policy dialogue. However, the changeover is not yet complete. Subsequent paragraphs in this document analyse the extent to which the TAP has been successful in attaining each of its three primary objectives. This document also outlines some of the issues that UNFPA is addressing as a result of this exercise.

### Outcome 1: Contribution of the TAP to increased regional and national capacity development

13. All CST teams are making concerted efforts to improve the technical capacity of individuals and institutions at regional and national levels. Principal activities include: (a) assessing regional and national capacity; (b) developing effective strategies for capacity development; (c) identifying, assessing and training consultants; (d) identifying national and regional institutions to form part of the CST network; (e) developing technical materials; (f) conducting formal and non-formal training; and (g) facilitating South-South cooperation. Nearly every CST provided results in each of these categories.

14. Despite the large number of CST initiatives linked to capacity-building, the actual impact of these efforts is difficult to evaluate. Reporting practices and criteria are not yet uniform. Some country offices do not find the CST rosters particularly useful. The results of the many training activities carried out by the CSTs require further evaluation. Moreover, it has become evident that strengthening institutions requires a more collaborative and long-term effort with other UNFPA divisions and units, within a broader institutional strategy for capacity development.

### Outcome 2: Contribution of the TAP to regional analyses, to the promotion of lessons learned, and to evidence-based recommendations for policy dialogue

15. The participation of the CSTs in regional and institutional-level activities has increased significantly under the TAP. The teams have become more involved in regional and cross-country analyses and initiatives as well as in substantive discussions with UNFPA headquarters. For instance, the CSTs participated in the reviews held in observance of the tenth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and, for the first time, in the design of the current UNFPA interregional programme. The CSTs have an enhanced role in institutional policy formulation. Improved coordination within the technical advisory system (composed of the UNFPA Technical Support Division and the CSTs) as well as with the geographical divisions has facilitated better communication between different programme levels.

16. For the first time, the CSTs are focusing on identifying, collating and disseminating best practices, replicable models and lessons learned in order to enhance policy dialogue. Within the framework of the new strategic direction, UNFPA programmes are expected to generate partnerships through policy dialogue, reflecting evidence-based arguments. As the primary technical field presence of UNFPA, the CSTs play a central role in promoting replicable experiences and models that will substantiate and legitimize the position of the Fund in various policy dialogues. For this purpose, the teams carried out numerous activities linked to improved policy dialogue. The results have not yet been completely reflected in country programmes. This is partly due to the time lag between policy discourse and its translation into action and to the move from project activities towards an evidence-based policy and advocacy approach in some country programmes.

### Outcome 3: Strategic nature of the technical support provided directly to countries by the TAP

17. A central concern of the TAP was to focus the activities of CST advisers on more strategic interventions, assigning more routine tasks to external consultants or institutions. As a result, UNFPA developed guidelines and criteria for strategic missions. A majority of CST missions are now deemed to be strategic, in accordance with established criteria. Using these criteria, an evaluation of the 440 field mission reports determined that 70 per cent were strategic in nature. Of all missions carried out in 2003,

16 per cent supported interagency activities such as common country assessments (CCAs) and the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs), Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) and sector-wide approaches (SWAs); 36 per cent supported country programme formulation; and the remaining 48 per cent supported other national development frameworks. Although no benchmark data exist against which to compare such figures, it is clear that UNFPA made significant efforts to ensure that CST advisers made strategic contributions.

18. There is a growing consensus that interventions at regional and subregional levels tend to have a more strategic impact. The CSTs are well positioned in the regions to perceive trends, identify problems and opportunities on a broad scale, and recommend effective approaches. Moreover, providing technical support based on regional strategies has proven to be a cost-effective approach to several types of demands for technical support.

19. The analysis of mission reports of CST advisers and the CST annual reports, as well as interviews with country offices, continues to reveal variations in the understanding of what constitutes strategic support. There is some question as to whether the CSTs, under the new model, are able to provide the entire range of technical support that countries feel they need. The field survey revealed that some country offices view the shift to strategic missions as simply reducing the availability of CST advisers for missions. Further refinement of the concept of strategic support and a better understanding of it will help to establish clearer priorities in allocating technical resources. The use of external consultants has not yet filled the void, either because existing rosters are viewed as inadequate or because outside consultants do not have sufficient institutional knowledge. In some regions, the CSTs provide extensive briefing and orientation workshops to potential consultants in order to address this issue.

20. Another issue in adopting more strategic interventions is the extent to which the strategic direction of UNFPA has influenced country programmes. The TAP is geared to the new strategic direction of UNFPA, particularly to the shift in emphasis from activities and projects to replicable models and lessons learned that are able to influence policy dialogue. Thus, the application of the TAP depends on the extent to which the new approach is understood and implemented. The survey conducted as part of the midterm review indicates that this understanding varies. Hence, the CSTs are still, in some cases, requested to provide technical assistance for traditional tasks that support project activities.

#### Strategic partnerships programme

21. In 2003 and 2004, UNFPA made progress in implementing the strategic partnerships programme, which represents a departure from past inter-agency arrangements. UNFPA approached four United Nations organizations – the World Health Organization (WHO); the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – to collaborate under this programme.

22. WHO is one of the principal UNFPA partners in the strategic partnerships programme. In 2003-2004, WHO implemented a project on family planning, sexually transmitted infections and safe motherhood. UNFPA held bilateral consultations with WHO on common areas of cooperation and designed a work plan to be implemented within the framework of UNFPA priorities. UNFPA will review the strategic partnerships programme at the end of 2004. In order to improve the effectiveness of population and reproductive health programmes, UNFPA will explore and actively promote mutual areas of collaboration with United Nations agencies and other partners, within the realm of their respective comparative advantages.

Other challenges to be addressed

23. The Executive Board approved the current TAP framework in view of the advantages that integrated, high-level teams have in generating a multidisciplinary approach to technical assistance within the areas of the UNFPA mandate. Questionnaires and interviews, however, revealed the need in some of the CSTs to reinforce team cohesiveness and the multidisciplinary approach that the new TAP demands.

24. The planning of technical assistance still requires attention. The exigencies of long-term planning (semester or year) imply a commitment to dates and activities over an extended period. At the same time, many country offices argue that the most strategic opportunities are often those that are not planned. The need to maintain some flexibility in CST advisers' schedules in order to respond to emerging opportunities is sometimes at odds with long-term planning. Contributing effectively to policy dialogue involves analysis, creative reflection and collating lessons learned to provide sound technical inputs. This requires providing timely responses when opportunities to participate in high-level policy dialogue arise.

25. Reporting procedures as well as monitoring and evaluation activities have improved in the TAP. Nevertheless, the analysis of annual reports reveals that the understanding of some concepts and the measurement of activities vary. Further refinement and standardization of annual reports will enable greater comparability and efficiency.

IV. ACTIONS TO ADDRESS ISSUES RAISED IN THE MIDTERM REVIEW

26. Further improvements in planning technical assistance needs and activities require a shared commitment to and understanding of strategic support as well as a consensus among country offices, geographical divisions, the Technical Support Division and CSTs regarding priorities and timetables within each region and subregion. UNFPA has established a working group to review the work planning process and to make recommendations to modify current practices in terms of process, structures and systems to improve coordination among the Technical Support Division, CSTs, geographical divisions, country offices and headquarters. UNFPA will continue to promote coordination through planning meetings and through the participation of CSTs in regional and interregional programming processes.

27. UNFPA will adopt a two-year timetable for programmable and time-bound activities in order to further expand effective participation of the CSTs in key exercises such as PRSPs, SWApS and CCA/UNDAFs, as well as in regional and interregional activities. At the same time, the Fund will retain some flexibility in order to allow CSTs to address emerging opportunities and needs.

28. In 2004, UNFPA will review the role and activities to be carried out by the CSTs in the short term, within the context of a broader institutional policy, taking account of the institutional position and comparative advantages of the CSTs as well as specific regional needs.

29. UNFPA recognizes the need to improve understanding and implementation of the strategic direction of the Fund and to orient technical support to it. UNFPA will address this subject at the UNFPA global meeting that will be held in November/December 2004. In order to improve policy dialogue, UNFPA will make greater efforts to enhance the quality and relevance of analyses, especially at the regional and subregional levels, in order to promote evidence-based arguments, replicable models and lessons learned.

30. To better provide and measure strategic technical support, UNFPA is revising previously defined parameters in order to refine and standardize the operational definition of strategic support. The Fund is also improving reporting procedures and clarifying and strengthening the role of external consultants and institutions in order to better address country and regional technical support needs. In addition, UNFPA will test consultant rosters in conjunction with country offices and make them more accessible.

31. The CST advisers are the key actors in the TAP programme. UNFPA will promote additional team-building efforts to further support their role in providing technical assistance. This will help to ensure multidisciplinary as well as greater cohesiveness and coherence in technical inputs. Moreover, UNFPA will also ensure that sufficient time is allotted in yearly and multi-annual work plans to upgrade the skills of CST advisers.

32. UNFPA will organize a CST advisers' meeting in September 2004 to discuss the issues raised in the midterm review and the actions required to address them. A dialogue with all TAP participants will contribute to enhanced awareness of the issues and a strengthened commitment to improve the effectiveness of the technical assistance provided through this programme.

#### **V. ELEMENTS OF A DECISION**

**33. The Executive Board may wish to take note of the midterm review of the Technical Advisory Programme (DP/FPA/2004/16).**

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## ANNEX

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE UNFPA TECHNICAL ADVISORY PROGRAMME

1. As approved by the Executive Board in decision 2002/3 for the period 2002-2005, the TAP constitutes the UNFPA strategy to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of its technical support in reproductive health, population and development, and gender. It is also a key element in implementing the strategic direction of the Fund. Specifically, the role of the TAP is to contribute to: (a) increased national and regional capacities to provide technical support for population and development programmes; (b) increased accessibility and use of technical information to improve the effectiveness of national population and development programmes; and (c) improved strategic technical support at key stages of the UNFPA country programme cycle as well as in United Nations system-wide processes such as the CCA and UNDAF.
2. The TAP is composed of nine multidisciplinary CSTs.<sup>1</sup> The TAP also includes the strategic partnerships programme with United Nations partners. The strategic partnerships programme is expected to produce results that will improve the effectiveness of UNFPA programmes through project agreements focused on the priorities and comparative advantages of each partner organization.
3. The composition and technical skills of each CST respond to the specific needs and capacities of the regions and subregions in which they are located. The size and composition of the CSTs vary in accordance with the capacities and abilities of the country offices in each region to access other sources of technical assistance, including South-South cooperation. CST deployment in Africa is the largest due to the magnitude of the need and the priority given to this region by the international community and the United Nations system.
4. The primary responsibility of the CSTs is to provide strategic technical support and to develop capacity at the regional and country level. However, the CSTs also provide a field-based regional perspective and undertake knowledge sharing at organizational and regional levels. The nine teams, together with the Technical Support Division at headquarters, constitute the UNFPA technical advisory system, which provides integrated technical support to the UNFPA programming process.
5. The TAP is designed to support the new strategic direction of UNFPA, particularly the shift in emphasis from activities and projects to replicable models and lessons learned that influence policy dialogue. Within the framework of the strategic direction, UNFPA programmes are expected to generate partnerships through policy dialogue, reflecting evidence-based arguments. The CSTs, as the primary technical field presence of UNFPA, occupy a central role in promoting replicable experiences or models that will substantiate and legitimize the Fund's stance in policy dialogue and that will promote the ICPD more effectively.
6. The main functions of the CSTs are to: a) conduct regional analyses and contribute to the development of regional strategies; b) support capacity-building for technical assistance; c) promote the UNFPA policy agenda; d) share lessons learned and best practices; and e) undertake strategic missions for the effective formulation and implementation of country programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> Asia (Bangkok, Thailand; Kathmandu, Nepal; and Suva, Fiji); Latin America (Mexico City, Mexico); Arab States (Amman, Jordan); Europe (Bratislava, Slovakia); Africa (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Dakar, Senegal; and Harare, Zimbabwe).