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PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

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NOTE ON "NORMATIVE AND OPERATIONAL" WORK IN FAO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, the Secretariat concluded that the terms "normative" and "operational" contributed to divisiveness between Members even though this dual role is a significant comparative advantage of FAO and discrimination in favour of either "normative" or "operational" work undermines the mutually supportive and beneficial relationships. The Director-General has sought to emphasize FAO as a knowledge organization, including its fundamental roles of identifying, disseminating and promoting best practices, while improving mechanisms for knowledge sharing and interdisciplinary approaches, which cover all aspects of FAO's mandate as expressed in the Preamble and Article 1 of the Constitution.

The clarification of terminology and its practical application in this note, based on examples drawn from FAO's specific context, seeks to assist in overcoming potential misunderstandings. It also clarifies and quantifies the needed and complementary contributions from the various layers of the organizational structure (headquarters, regional offices, subregional offices and FAORs). It emphasises, in particular, the role of regional offices in normative work and the consistent effort to also be devoted by the multidisciplinary teams in the subregional offices. While the results of the last Work Measurement Survey indicate that FAORs contributed 18% of their time to normative activities at country level, that effort is expected to increase under the new operating model through participation in subregional multidisciplinary teams.

When discussing the substance of FAO's work, the governing bodies should provide as clear guidance to the Secretariat as possible about whether the Organization should address or not a given issue or problem. The expected achievements within the subject area, formulated in programme entities in conformity with results-based management principles, should determine the nature of the work, which may also vary over time and across locations.

The expression of a programme priority should not limit managerial choices of the manner in which the priorities are delivered. In the case of FAO, the cost of delivering programmes is normally lower if staff is located outside headquarters. For example, taking a typical balance of professional and general service staff, staff costs in the regional offices are 14% to 30% lower than at headquarters (i.e. US$ 0.5 to US$ 1 million lower for a multidisciplinary team of 7 professional plus related general service support staff).

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Background

1. The basic functions of the Organization are described in Article I of its Constitution. They include the collection, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of information; promoting national and international action, including adoption of policies in food, agriculture, nutrition and conservation of natural resources; and furnishing technical assistance as governments may request.

2. The terms "normative" and "operational" are not contained in FAO's Basic Texts, but feature regularly in discussions among delegations and staff. As they began to get used by Members to express their individual preferences on the balance among different activities in the total FAO's programme of work, efforts were made to clarify the meanings of the above two terms (cf. Annex).

3. It is important to stress that the terms are not specific to FAO but affect the entire UN system. In fact, the expression "normative" draws from historical expectations that international institutions would *inter alia* set norms or standards in respective areas, or promote related negotiations among countries.

4. This note seeks to highlight possible misunderstandings which these terms may evoke, provides practical definitions based on examples, and outlines the role of the various organizational layers of FAO in "normative" activities.

Possible misunderstandings

5. The categorization of FAO's activities in terms of "normative" and "operational" was highlighted in 1994 in relation to the restructuring process proposed at that time, acknowledging the broad mandate of the organization in undertaking activities of global interest, as well as specific technical cooperation activities in countries or regions. This was also considered useful in fostering awareness among FAO units of their mutually supportive contributions to respective areas. However, the use of too condensed language can lead to unwarranted generalizations, as follows.

a) Normative and operational work being mutually exclusive and independent

6. In 2005, the Secretariat concluded that the terms "normative" and "operational" contributed to heightened and unnecessary divisiveness between Members. In his reform proposals, the Director-General offered a more contemporary insight of FAO as a knowledge organization that transcends this distinction, i.e. taking full advantage of the potential of present and future information and communication technologies in order to strengthen its fundamental roles of identifying, disseminating and promoting best practices, and improving mechanisms for knowledge sharing and interdisciplinary approaches, while building capacities in members for more effective management of knowledge exchange.

7. In effect, an undesirable consequence of the broad categorization of FAO's activities into normative and operational is that they could be seen in antagonistic terms, thereby understating the importance of interdependencies, including the following:

- the two types of activities are part of a continuum, whereby normative outputs are enhanced by operational work (e.g. the establishment of CODEX food standards is clearly part of normative work, whereas many Members require direct assistance to strengthen national institutions so that such standards can be effectively implemented and thus enable them to participate fully in regional and global processes); another view of this highly desirable continuum is that norms or recommended practices can originate from scientific analysis or empirical determination, but need to be reconciled with realism and thorough understanding of what many countries can comply with in a world of diverse capacities;

- the "feedback loop" that often occurs between normative work and the experience gained from operational work (e.g. the principle of applying Integrated Pest Management in projects and programmes implemented and supported through operational systems leads to lessons being learned that then form the core of technical guidelines which are of general interest to the Membership and may be further refined).

8. In fact, the Strategic Framework 2000-2015, approved by the Conference in November 1999, included the following statement (paragraph 126) concerning leveraging of resources: *The aim will be to increase the synergy between the normative and operational activities, and to enhance the Field Programme's dual function of, on the one hand, translating into operation and action the concepts and findings developed through normative activities and, on the other hand, enriching normative work through the feedback from field experience.* FAO's strategic partnership agreements with donors, such as with the Netherlands and Norway, aim *inter alia* at strengthening the synergy between normative and operational activities, taking full advantage of FAO's knowledge, tools and expertise, for example to trigger policy change at national level.

9. This was reaffirmed in the recent Conference Resolution on Reforms in the Organization (CR 6/2005) which shared: *the Director-General's assessment of the need to enhance the Organization's ability to fulfil its mandate through its normative and operational activities including through concrete contributions to the well- recognized challenges such as assisting Members and achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and assisting developing countries' implementation of international agricultural and food standards.*

10. This dual role is one of the main comparative advantages of FAO. Discrimination in favour of either "normative" or "operational" work undermines the above beneficial relationships.

b) Use of the categorization in the context of priority setting

11. It is clearly a prerogative of Members to express views on the balance among the various activities and functions of the Organization, depending on their individual expectations of, or requirements for services from FAO and their national contexts. Criteria for priority setting, including the need to maintain a balance between "normative" and "operational" work, were approved by the Council in 1995 and are incorporated in the Strategic Framework. Their frequent use in debates on FAO's priorities has increased the risk of decisions being based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

12. Basically, such a broad categorization leads to difficulties of translating expressed preferences into action and it would seem necessary to be more specific about substantive programme priorities. FAO's work should be driven by its substantive priorities and not by a superficial or too dogmatic position on normative versus operational work. The priority subject area should determine the proportion of normative and/or operational work, which may also vary over time and across locations.

c) Normative work is implemented only by headquarters

13. A swift generalization is that normative work is perceived as being implemented by headquarters units, whereas operational work or other forms of technical support to countries or regions are believed to dominate in decentralized offices. Yet, the External Evaluation of Decentralization found that normative work was: *"essential in all regions on common problems for groups of countries and is of particular interest to medium-income countries. The evaluation concluded that strong links between global normative work and the specific normative requirements of individual countries, groups of countries and regions are essential."*

14. In fact, all the functions described in the Constitution of FAO are necessarily carried out at all locations and levels of the Organization. Of course, a particular function may be emphasized more at one level than another, depending on where and when it can be most effectively and efficiently implemented. The "distribution" of responsibilities may therefore greatly vary, depending on the nature of substantive priority areas and geographical and temporal factors.

d) Less regard to cost efficiency

15. The expression of a programme priority should not limit managerial choices on the manner in which it is delivered. Cost efficiency is an important consideration for determining the geographic location from which programmes should be delivered. Indeed, improvements in information and communication technology and the availability of a comprehensive Enterprise Resource Planning system following the implementation of Oracle HRMS from 2007, are extending the range of functions that can be undertaken outside headquarters, or executed through a network of specialists in geographically dispersed locations.

16. In the case of FAO, the cost of delivering programmes is normally lower if staff is located outside headquarters. This is in part due to salary differentials between headquarters and other locations. By way of illustration, the table below summarizes the composite cost of a professional staff member (at P-5 grade) and related general service support (at G-4 grade) in the major locations where FAO is present, at 2006-07 costs. The costs are expressed in relative terms, with the headquarters amount shown as 100. The table indicates that the costs in the listed locations are 14% to 30% lower than at headquarters. In financial terms, this would translate into a biennial cost differential of US$ 0.5 million to US$ 1 million for a multidisciplinary team of 7 professional plus related GS support staff.

Relative Biennial Cost of Delivering Programmes *(based on 1 P-5 and 1 G-4 post)*

	Headquarters	Africa (RAF)	Latin America and the Caribbean (RLC)	Asia and the Pacific (RAP)	Near East and North Africa (RNE)	Europe and Central Asia (SEUR)
Index	100	86	85	79	70	74

17. Other factors contributing to overall cost differentials which have not been quantified, may include the availability of government provided support staff, availability of local human resource expertise and differences in non-staff requirements such as for travel.

e) Regular Budget resources are for normative work and extra-budgetary resources for operational work

18. As fully described in the FAO’s planning documents, Regular Budget resources finance activities that are consistent with the mandate laid out in Article I of the Constitution and with more specific guidance of the Governing bodies. Conversely, the above example of strategic partnership agreements with donors illustrates that extra-budgetary resources can also support normative work.

A practical application of “normative” and “operational” functions to the work of the Organization

19. The following summary, based on specific examples, seeks to clarify the terminology and its practical application.

Normative work, to comprise:

a) Standard setting work, i.e. through treaties, conventions or similar instruments, generally of a binding nature on, or involving voluntary commitments from contracting parties, e.g.: IPPC and phytosanitary standards, Codex Alimentarius, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources, Rotterdam Convention on PIC, Fisheries Compliance Agreement, Voluntary Guidelines for the Right to Food, etc.

b) Activities of general interest:

- policy and outlook studies, e.g. AT 20xx, forestry outlooks, etc.;
- “state of ...” (e.g. SOFA, SOFIA, SOFO, etc.) and other status reports (e.g. on Plant and Animal Genetic Resources);
- advocacy work and use of convening powers, either to address major ethical issues – e.g. the persistence of hunger and malnutrition – or issues of major international concern – e.g. leading to various Codes of Conduct, the International Plans of Actions in the fisheries sector, agreements reached in its Technical Committees or Expert Groups, etc.;
- informing debates in other Bodies about implications for the food and agriculture sector, e.g. in relation to WTO Trade Negotiations, the International Forum on Forests, etc.;
- informing discussions from the perspective of food and agriculture and extending their understanding to regional and country levels (e.g. including participation by FAORs in national planning exercises);
- support to, or catalyst of international cooperation, e.g. through regional fisheries bodies, in combating animal diseases and plant pests of transboundary nature, in fostering cooperation for internationally shared river basins, etc.;
- collection and dissemination of technical information (such as statistics, maps and documents) through the WAICENT framework;
- global monitoring or alert systems: e.g. the GIEWS, FIVIMS, those dealing with environmental or health risks relating to FAO mandate including food safety problems, etc.

c) Activities of general interest with a primary knowledge management dimension, e.g.:

- dissemination of best practices;
- knowledge exchange networks;
- dialogue with FAO experts (i.e. “Ask FAO”);
- other publications and global databases.

Operational work to comprise:

a) specific technical cooperation projects in countries or regions (under a variety of funding arrangements);
b) investment project formulation (generally upon request from partner IFIs);
c) provision of material assistance (mostly in relation to emergencies);
d) provision of direct policy or technical advice to counterpart authorities or local entities;
e) training and other forms of capacity building.

Contributions to the above sets of activities from the decentralized offices

20. As noted above, a distinction should be made between substantive priorities on the one hand and delivery mechanisms for executing priority programmes on the other, with effectiveness and cost efficiency being important considerations for the latter. In this regard, technical staff is to undertake both “normative” and “operational” activities, regardless of where they are located. It is equally important that the Organization benefit from a solid presence in the “field”, so that the feedback loop and learning of lessons from actual situations can effectively take place.

21. The reform proposals submitted to the 2005 Conference and the revised PWB 2006-07 proposals which address *inter alia* the further decentralization endorsed by the Conference make due allowance for all the three layers in the decentralized structure (i.e. the refocused Regional Offices, the new Sub-regional Offices and the FAORs) to contribute to varying degrees to both sets of activities, as explained below.

a) Regional offices

22. Regarding the Regional Offices, and restricted to Africa in accordance with the Conference Resolution on Reforms, the revised PWB includes a complement of technical posts under the new operating model, the work of which would be fully integrated with that of the corresponding divisions at Headquarters, including full involvement with normative activities as defined above.

23. Thus, it is expected that the reconfigured Regional Offices would be primarily involved with:

a) servicing of, and substantive inputs to the work of regional bodies, including those dealing with fisheries and forestry matters;
b) policy studies of regional interest and the identification of key regional issues to influence programming of FAO activities in the region;
c) inputs to global assessments, reflecting region-specific situations (e.g. through the land or water, forestry, fisheries, nutrition and other specialists based there);
d) substantive interaction with major regional institutions, advocating due reflection of agricultural and food concerns in their activities and identifying opportunities for cooperation;
e) general support to inter-country cooperation in relation to animal diseases and plant pests of transboundary significance, through dedicated specialists familiar with the respective regional contexts;cooperation in the management of shared river basins;assistance to national statistical systems and support to regional statistical bodies (with the systematic positioning of at least one statistician post in each office);ensuring coherence and exchanges of experiences in the application of normative instruments developed under the aegis of FAO (food standards, plant quarantine, genetic resources, etc.);
f) publications on issues of key regional interest, coupled with the identification of best practices and other information dissemination, as part of the global knowledge management efforts of the Organization, feeding as appropriate into the supportive systems being progressively put in place.

b) Subregional offices

24. In the subregional offices, the Multi-Disciplinary Teams will balance action on requests for operational assistance from Members in cooperation with the concerned country offices, with contributions to normative work in concert with the regional offices and headquarters. The exact profiles of technical officers within the main functional areas covered will take account of the characteristics of the sub-region including the size and composition of the field programme and the nature of the REIO served.

25. For example, the needs of countries in the Central Asia sub-region are primarily institutional as they move from planning to supporting agriculture and rural development. Therefore, the technical work in the SRO for Central Asia would focus on such areas as agricultural management and marketing, food safety and consumer protection, and land tenure and rural development, through the provision of staff and non-staff resources. By the same token, the SRO for West Africa would include specialists on rural infrastructure and equipment, marketing, credit and rural finance, and aquaculture to address institutional changes and emerging fields.

26. It is anticipated that staff in SROs would devote substantial time to normative work, as defined above.

c) Country offices

27. The Annual Work Measurement Surveys, which have been completed by headquarters and decentralized staff to document the use of time in relation to various types of activities can assist with quantifying the previous work of the FAORs. The results of the last Work Measurement Survey indicates that FAORs contributed on average 18% of their time to normative activities at country level, as defined above. This is of course expected to increase under the new operating model through participation in the sub-regional multi-disciplinary teams now being put in place in Africa and Central Asia.

Progamme Entity 2CP01 *Secretariat of the International Plant Protection Commission (IPPC)* is an example of an activity that spans the continuum of normative and operational work and is implemented at all levels of the Organization.

High priority is given to the IPPC, in particular standard setting, information exchange and capacity building (para 167). The entity's objective of "appropriate regulatory frameworks and effective national and international phytosanitary measures to prevent the spread and introduction of plant pests" is accomplished through seven major outputs:

1. International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures
2. Harmonized approaches among concerned international and regional agreements and organizations
3. Exchange of mandatory phytosanitary information
4. Support national phytosanitary systems
5. Settlement of Disputes
6. Provision of an efficient administrative framework
7. Support to Regional FAO Phytosanitary Commissions

While major outputs 1, 5 and 6 would involve primarily work at headquarters, major outputs 2, 3 and 7 relate primarily to work at regional, subregional and national levels. The work of IPPC is performed by a total of 16 professional officers, five of whom are located in the Plant Protection Service (AGPP) and dedicate 100% of their time to the entity, along with one-third of the time of the AGPP Service Chief. In addition, four professional officers in the Regional Offices and six professional officers in the Subregional Offices plan to spend from 5% to 40% of their time on the IPPC programme entity. FAORs would also be involved in lending support to work carried out a national level.

ANNEX

The publication *FAO's Normative Role – A Review for Members and Partners* (issued in 1998) provided the following definitions of "normative" and "operational".

	Normative	Operational
The purpose/use of outputs	• to serve as scientific/technical guides or references for global/universal applications • for use by FAO, its Member Nations and the international community in setting common standards and methods • as an input into the preparation of normative rules, criteria, approaches and methodologies or similar RP activities	• to meet specific requirements of individual country or a group of countries in addressing its/their concrete development needs • to provide the country/countries with technical, managerial and information support through adapted application of scientific/technical standards and approaches
Main types of outputs	• scientific/technical standards methods and approaches as the basis for adapted application at country level • policy-oriented norms and standards for international agreements and conventions • data/information base at global level • studies/reports information in preparation of the above	• practical guidelines and advice derived from normative standards and approaches • strengthened institutions and trained manpower • improved data/information systems • analytical studies/proposals for direct application within a given project/programme • improved systems for development operations