2016
ANNUAL REPORT ON ASSURING QUALITY AT THE ECA

ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

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Foreword

The production and delivery of high-quality products and services are central for achieving the Economic Commission for Africa's (ECA) strategic objective to influence development policy in Africa and make a difference in the continent's transformation. They are also pivotal for achieving the Commission's objective to be a credible and trusted actor in the development landscape of Africa. In essence, success in carrying out the ECA mandate to promote the economic and social development of its 54 member States, foster intraregional integration, and promote international cooperation for development on the continent hinges on the quality of the Commission's work.

That is why ECA has taken steps to strengthen its quality assurance function, including the creation of the Operational Quality Section (OQS) in the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division (SPOQD) and the articulation of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan for the period 2014-2017. ECA made significant progress in rolling out the policy and plan in 2016, notably with the creation of quality assurance panels to vet the Commission's products and services and ensure that they are of the highest standard. Quality assurance procedures were also approved by the Senior Management Team (SMT) to guide the work of the panels and the process of producing and delivering major products and services.

The aforementioned activities indeed consolidated quality assurance practices at ECA in 2016, but there remains room for improvement. In that regard, ownership of quality assurance instruments and the capacity of ECA staff to use them effectively need to be enhanced. Being able to fully implement the quality assurance system is key to sustaining the Commission's niche as a think-tank for African development policy issues. It is, therefore, vital, go-ing forward, that ECA staff are conversant with and diligently apply approved procedures involved in delivering their outputs or reviewing such outputs in the case of the members of quality assurance panels. The Operational Quality Section should commensurately step up its effort to raise awareness and strengthen the capacity of the staff of the Commission to play their various roles in the drive to achieve objectives of ECA.

I would like to commend staff members serving on the various panels for their commitment and for effectively playing their role in the period under review, notwithstanding the heavy workload this might have entailed. I would also like to commend the Director of the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division and staff members of the Operational Quality Section for spearheading quality assurance activities at ECA.

The Commission has in place the foundation to make a difference in the transformation of Africa. This task would be facilitated if important lessons from past experiences are continuously and systematically used to improve the merit of the Commission's work. To that end, I urge ECA staff to take into consideration the quality issues and lessons presented in this report in delivering the Commission's products and services.

Abdalla Hamdok
Executive Secretary, a.i.
Economic Commission for Africa

Introduction

The present report presents the function of quality assurance at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in 2016, with emphasis on the results achieved, challenges encountered, lessons learned and future prospects. This function, during the period under review, was guided by the Commission's Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. The International Organization for Standardization definition of "quality" as the "degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirement" has been adopted for this plan. The requirements to be fulfilled, in the context of ECA, are derived from the Commission's strategic direction and its work programme, and embodied in its quality objectives.

The quality assurance gains made by ECA in 2015 were consolidated in 2016 as the Commission continued to roll out its Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. In that regard, essential quality assurance structures and tools were established. For instance, the ECA Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board endorsed and the Senior Management Team (SMT) approved quality assurance procedures for the review of the ECA Performance Management Dashboard; events; ECA indices; publications; strategic planning instruments; and carbon footprint. Quality assurance panels were created for six major ECA products and services, including: the Economic Report on Africa, country profiles, data and statistics, strategic planning instruments; information and communications technology (ICT), and knowledge management; and business processes. For the first time, quality assurance panels and procedures were used to review the quality of the Economic Report on Africa and ECA strategic planning instruments, including the Commission's programme performance report for the 2015-2016 biennium and its 2018-2019 proposed programme budget. Lessons learned from 2015 were used to improve existing mechanisms, particularly in the review of 21 ECA country profiles.

In 2016, ECA adhered to staff involvement as one of the core principles that guide its quality assurance efforts. This is based on the premise that the production of quality products and services is the responsibility of every member of staff. Therefore, their full involvement is necessary for the Commission to achieve its objectives. As a result, quality assurance reviews in 2016 were accompanied by a series of briefings to improve staff's awareness about the Commission's quality assurance function given during meetings of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts (ICE) of ECA subregional offices and a capacity building workshop on quality assurance organized for ECA staff in September 2016. In addition, the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 and the 2015 annual report on assuring quality at ECA were presented to the entire staff of the Commission at a town hall meeting in May 2016.
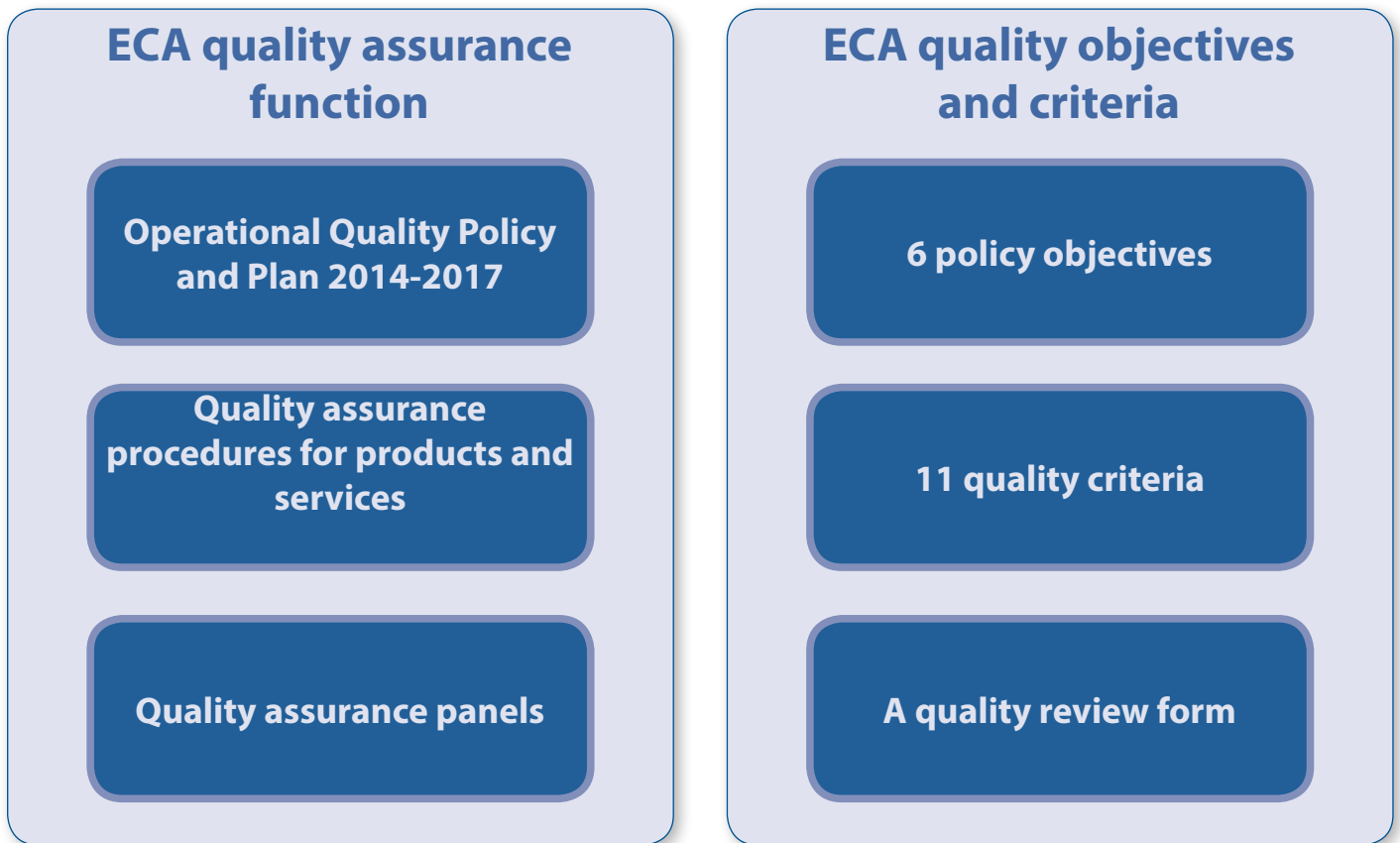
These reviews and briefings facilitated staff ownership and recognition of the merit of quality assurance in 2016, as up to 27 staff members from across the Commission served as members of different quality assurance panels. Similarly, the subregional offices acknowledged that the review of the country profiles by the quality assurance panels improved the quality of the profiles by way of streamlined review tools and reports. ECA divisions that are responsible for producing the Economic Report on Africa in 2017 acknowledged that the input of the quality assurance panel helped to enrich the quality of the publication.

In 2016, the quality objectives of ECA were once again used as criteria to identify best practices in the delivery of expected accomplishments and as a framework to present the Commission's programme performance reports. Presenting the work of ECA through a quality lens provides a compelling narrative of the Commission's niche and value addition to its beneficiaries. Recognition of results achieved, and related outputs delivered, through processes that are well attuned to ECA quality objectives as best practices served as a motivating factor for the divisions and subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP). It is envis-

aged that the desire for recognition will lead to improved commitment to the delivery of products and services from a quality perspective across the Commission.

These highlights are described in detail in the remainder of this report. Section 2 presents the results achieved in 2016 under the different ECA quality assurance policy objectives. Section 3 discusses the challenge and lessons learned in implementing quality assurance practices while section 4 presents the way forward for the quality assurance function of ECA.

Figure 1. A snapshot of the ECA quality assurance system

ECA quality assurance function

- Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017
- Quality assurance procedures for products and services
- Quality assurance panels

ECA quality objectives and criteria

- 6 policy objectives
- 11 quality criteria
- A quality review form

Quality assurance results – highlights of 2016

The momentum generated in rolling out the ECA quality assurance function in 2015 was sustained in 2016. This was reflected in the use of specific instruments developed by OQS and approved by SMT in reviewing the quality of major products and services of the Commission. This section focuses on the extent to which the ECA quality assurance policy objectives were achieved, highlighting the contribution of various tools, processes and specific activities directed towards the achievement of those objectives.

Policy objective 1: Support ECA to offer innovative thinking for the structural transformation of Africa in line with agreed continental goals

As part of the effort to achieve this policy objective, ECA continued to implement the Performance Management Dashboard in 2016, but at a more rigourous pace. The dashboard is an executive management tool developed to monitor the organizational performance related to vital goals and functions of the Commission. It is also an accountability and learning tool that shows progress in critical areas of the Commission's business model.

The Performance Management Dashboard, which is fully operational, combines critical strategic, operational and financial information to aid strategic decision-making and reports on efforts to bring together streams of ECA work in policy research and knowledge delivery to achieve greater policy influence. The dashboard also monitors the implementation of the measures instituted as part of the ECA business model clustered around four blocks: policy influence; credibility and trust; accountability and learning; and operational effectiveness.

The ECA quality assurance function plays an essential role in ensuring the credibility and usability of information extracted from the Performance Management Dashboard. In early 2016, a comprehensive quality review of the dashboard, including content and technical aspects, was undertaken, and key findings and recommendations for revamping the dashboard were presented and discussed at length at a retreat comprised of the focal points for the dashboard from all ECA divisions, the subregional offices and IDEP. A total of 37 ECA staff members attended the retreat and reviewed the quality of the dashboard based on the following guidelines:

1. Key performance indicators (KPIs) have to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound) with clear instructions that include their baseline and target, the implementing divisions, responsibility for data entry and documentary evidence if required. When applicable, references have to be made to relevant strategy documents, circulars, and protocols, among others;

Figure 2: Status of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) after the review

New KPIs	Retained KPIs	Revised KPIs
15	30	41
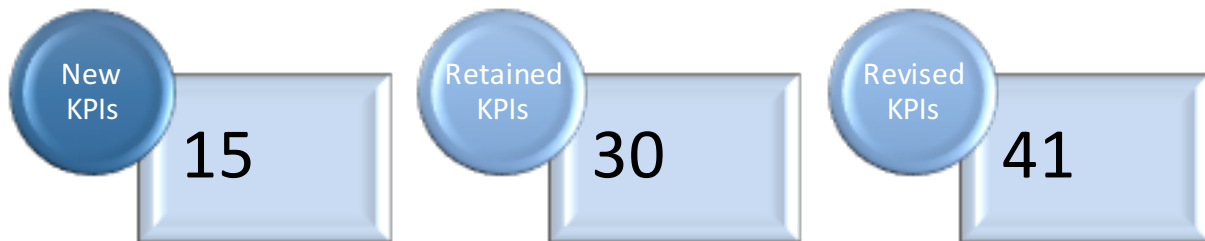
2. Baselines and targets need to be determined by the implementing divisions;

3. Only absolute values need to be entered into the electronic platform for each KPI;

4. A standard performance rating needs to be applied for all KPIs;

5. The user guide and the information technology platform need to be aligned.

This process resulted in a revised and refined set of KPIs, a revised user guide and a revamped electronic platform. After the quality review of the Performance Management Dashboard, 30 KPIs were retained (remained unchanged), 41 were reformulated, 15 were introduced, and 10 were dropped or merged (figure 2). Upon the completion of this review exercise, quarterly data quality reviews were continued to assist SMT in making strategic decisions.

Policy objective 2: **Strengthen the capacity of ECA to achieve high-quality products and services that are relevant, credible and effectively influence policy choices and decisions pertaining to the African transformation**

In support of this policy objective, four main quality assurance activities were completed: (a) development, approval and official roll-out of quality assurance procedures; (b) a capacity development workshop to build skills in using these procedures; (c) the constitution of quality assurance panels; and (d) quality assurance reviews for selected products and services that apply those approved procedures.

First, inspired by the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, a set of quality assurance procedures were developed to assist divisions, subregional offices and IDEP in efforts to improve the quality of their products and services. In 2016, quality assurance procedures were finalized and published for six ECA strategic outputs: Performance Management Dashboard; events; indices; publications; strategic planning instruments; and carbon footprint, as indicated in the introductory section of this report.

Second, to build awareness, knowledge and skills in applying the abovementioned procedures, OQS organized a capacity-building workshop on quality assurance in Addis Ababa on 7 and 8 September 2016, which mainly targeted programme management focal points of the divisions, the subregional offices and IDEP. The main objective of the workshop was to enhance the culture of quality in delivering ECA products and services and develop a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of quality assurance mechanisms. The workshop offered an opportunity for staff to examine existing policies and procedures; share experiences and provide feedback; and identify best practices in delivering quality outputs. It was designed to ensure better understanding of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 and various approved quality assurance procedures. Twenty-seven ECA staff members participated in the workshop. Apart from presentations on quality assurance practices at the Commission, break-

out group discussions were organized to provide hands-on experience in applying procedures for reviewing selected ECA products and services.

At the end of the workshop, the participants indicated that the group discussions were very useful and that they gained new insights into the merit of quality assurance function at ECA (figure 3). Moreover, they provided valuable suggestions to improve the quality assurance function, to be discussed in section 3 of this report.

Figure 3: Opinions of workshop participants

Third, several quality reviews were completed using those approved procedures. Specifically, ECA conducted the following quality reviews during the reporting period:

1. Strategic planning instruments

Quality reviews of several strategic planning instruments were undertaken in 2016, including the ECA 24-month programme performance review for the 2014-2015 biennium; the 6--month programme performance review for the 2015-2016 biennium; the proposed programme budget for the 2018-2019 biennium; and the annual ECA report to the Conference of Ministers. The reviews of the performance reports were conducted by OQS while those of the other strategic planning instruments were conducted by quality assurance panels.

The reviews of the 24-month and 6-month programme performance reviews were undertaken to assess progress made in carrying out the Commission's programme of work in the given periods. Guided by the ECA quality objectives, the reviews focused on analysing the robustness of evidence provided for determining the progress achieved in implementing the expected accomplishments. The programmes were also scrutinized with regard to the alignment of programme outputs with the development policy priorities of Africa, hence to ensure compliance with the ECA think-tank business model. The quality review of the ECA proposed programme budget for the 2018-2019 biennium and the annual ECA report to the Conference of Ministers focused on assessing compliance with established statutory guidelines, leading to significant improvements in the final documents to be submitted to United Nations headquarters and the Conference of Ministers.

2. ECA country profiles

In the last quarter of 2016, OQS successfully organized internal reviews of 21 ECA country profiles, namely those for the following countries: Algeria; Angola; Burundi; Cabo Verde; Central African Republic; Chad; Djibouti; Equatorial Guinea; Gabon; Gambia, Ghana; Madagascar; Malawi; Mauritania; Mauritius; Mozambique; Nigeria; Somalia; South Africa; Swaziland; and Tunisia. Lessons learned from the previous year were taken into account in the reviews. The review panels provided valuable comments and suggestions for improving the quality of the country profiles and the revised country profiles were approved for external review and subsequent publication.
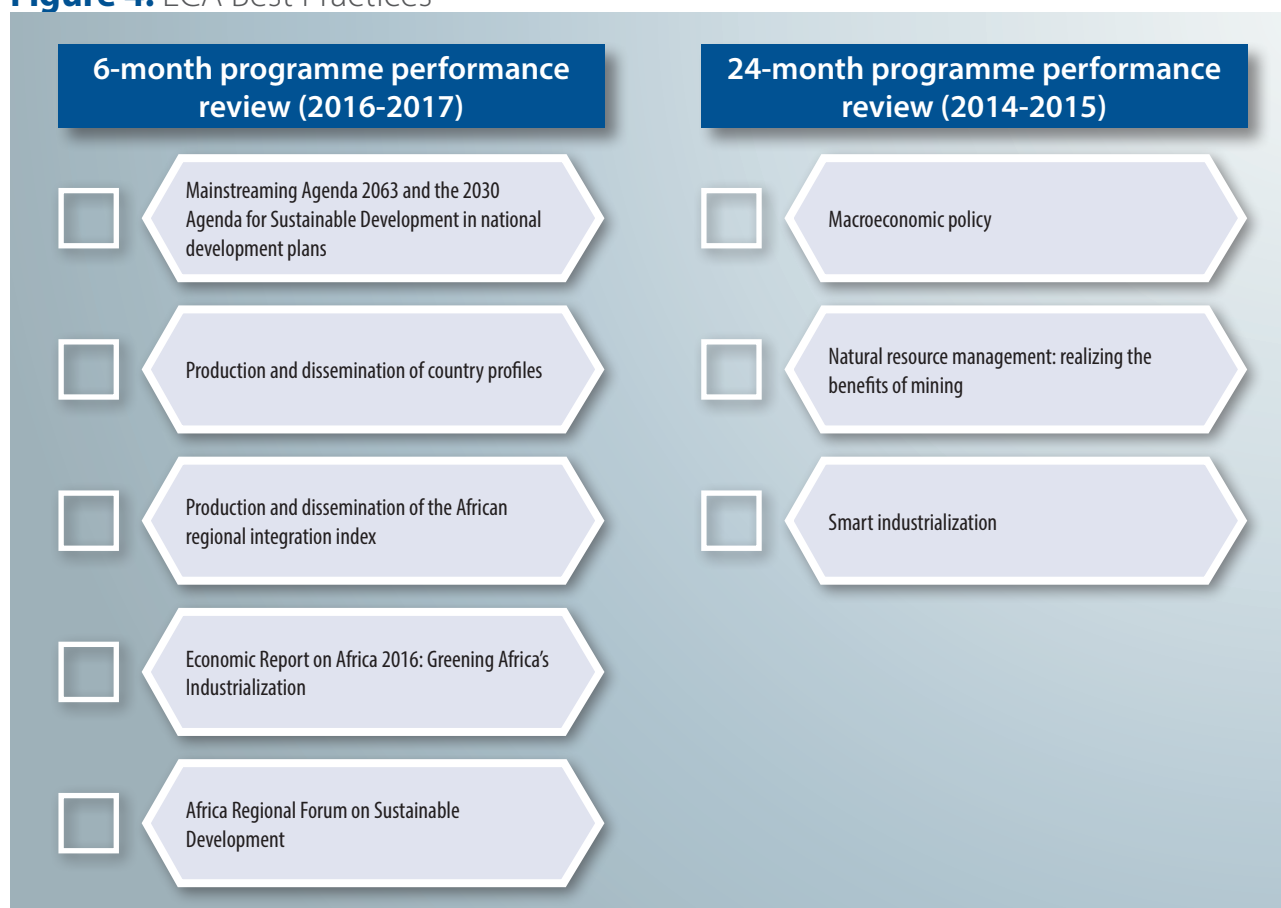
3. 2017 Economic Report on Africa

The newly established quality assurance panel convened in December 2016 to conduct an internal review of the Economic Report on Africa 2017 in accordance with the ECA quality objectives and associated criteria. The overall objective of the review was to ensure that ECA publications, including its flagship products, are of good quality before they are disseminated widely. The panel found that the draft chapters were well written, clearly addressing the main theme of the report, "Urbanization and industrialization for Africa's transformation". It provided valuable comments and suggestions for improving the publication and the revised report was approved for external review and subsequent publication.

Policy objective 3: Enhance the use of the results from the ECA quality assurance system to support accountability, programme learning and resource allocation

The divisions and subregional offices of ECA were generally found to have recognized the value addition of quality reviews; some of them used the review results to improve the quality of their products. For example, some of the subregional offices applied recommendations of the panels to improve their country profiles. In addition, follow-up mechanisms are being put in place to ensure that results from the quality reviews are used for strategic decision-making and organizational learning. Of particular interest, lessons learned from conducting quality assurance reviews on several ECA products and services were widely discussed and shared during the process to develop the current ECA Programme Management Manual in order to make the revamped results-based management system more responsive to organizational learning. Efforts have also been made to enhance the exchange of knowledge and best practices in programme management within ECA.

Furthermore, a quality recognition programme is being developed to acknowledge and recognize individuals and teams for their exemplary contributions from a quality perspective and to highlight best practices. For example, the quality reviews of the 6-month and 24-month programme performance reviews led to identification of best practices in bringing together knowledge generation and delivery to influence policy. Those practices were presented to ECA partners (figure 4). The criteria for selecting the best practices include the extent to which the outputs were strategic and influenced development outcomes, particularly with regard to the African transformation agenda; brought together policy research and knowledge delivery strands of the work of ECA; were based on sound statistics; and mainstreamed a gender perspective, among others.

Figure 4: ECA Best Practices

6-month programme performance review (2016-2017)	24-month programme performance review (2014-2015)
Mainstreaming Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in national development plans	Macroeconomic policy
Production and dissemination of country profiles	Natural resource management: realizing the benefits of mining
Production and dissemination of the African regional integration index	Smart industrialization
Economic Report on Africa 2016: Greening Africa's Industrialization	
Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development	

Policy objective 4: Assure that risks that threaten the quality and sustainability of ECA products and services are appropriately and continuously assessed, monitored and managed

The risks that threaten the quality of products and services of ECA revolve around the capacity of staff to undertake quality assurance processes and use related tools, their buy-in of these processes and the appropriateness of the tools. The capacity-building workshop discussed under policy objective 2 was aimed at mitigating the risk of inadequate knowledge and skills of ECA staff to undertake quality assurance processes. Efforts were also made to enhance staff buy-in of the Commission's quality assurance functions. To that end, the procedures for reviewing the country profiles were simplified, limiting the process to the systematic review of quality objectives. Accountability in the production of the country profiles was also enhanced by creating a mechanism — a form to be completed by subregional offices to track whether they have taken on board the recommendations of panel members and, if not, the reasons for not doing so. In essence, the form compels the subregional offices to indicate how the recommendations are addressed or why they are not being addressed.

The capacity development workshop also provided a platform to identify key risks that threaten the quality and sustainability of ECA products and services and mitigating measures. It also helped to identify key principles to guide the ECA quality assurance function. The principles that address the identified risks are the following:

1. Commitment and involvement of senior management staff;

2. Collective ownership through inclusive quality assurance processes (extensive and active participation of staff across ECA in quality assurance processes);

3. Continuous improvement and simplification of quality assurance processes and tools;

4. Awareness of quality assurance processes and tools through continuous sensitization of staff;

5. Continues capacity-building to improve skills and knowledge related to quality assurance;

6. Well-targeted entry points for quality assurance interventions in the delivery of products and services;

7. Accountability for quality assurance interventions;

8. Continuous follow-up by OQS to the implementation of quality assurance actions taken by divisions and subregional offices and IDEP.

Policy objective 5: Promote compliance with the mandates of the Economic and Social Council and organization-wide initiatives on carbon footprint and gender mainstreaming

The Commission has adopted carbon footprint and gender mainstreaming as two important cross-cutting issues, in line with the guidelines set by the Economic and Social Council. First, ECA rolled out the Commission-wide procedure on "measuring carbon footprint" in 2016 to comply with the United Nations-wide initiative on carbon footprint. Prior to the adoption of the procedure, environmental concerns were addressed by incorporating them in various management tools, such as the Performance Management Dashboard. as a critical area of performance. The procedure on carbon footprint provides the foundation for consistently and coherently monitoring and measuring the Commission's progress towards achieving its goals for carbon emissions guided by the environmental performance indicators (EPI). The procedure was mainly designed in compliance with United Nations-system wide directives. It is instrumental as it provides a set of step-by-step instructions and methods, which help to check whether existing carbon accounting and reporting processes and procedures are meeting accepted international standards. As such, the procedure is comprehensive in that it lays out a plan for accounting for greenhouse gas emissions from all sources, including official air travel, heating and ventilation, official vehicles and electricity consumption.

Given the complexity involved in tracking greenhouse gas emissions, the quality assurance procedures focus on systematizing the process of data collection by ECA units and assuring data quality so that sound strategic decisions are made. These procedures will be fully implemented with

the first round of monitoring greenhouse gas emissions in the current biennium.

Another area that calls for compliance with the United Nations mandate relates to gender mainstreaming. In response to Economic and Social Council resolution 2014/12, the Secretary-General submitted a report on mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system (E/2015/58). The report included a discussion on progress made in implementing the United Nations System Wide Action Plan (UN SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in mainstreaming gender equality in common programming processes of the United Nations at the country level, including through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and other planning frameworks. ECA has been reporting for UN SWAP since 2013 to highlight the changes in the Commission's programmatic, operational and financial architecture in an effort to contribute to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Given the progress made towards realizing UN SWAP, ECA was invited to pilot UNSWAP 2.0, which incorporates new indicators on normative gender results. In the preparations for the pilot year 2017, ECA was actively involved in developing and finalizing the new methodological guidelines for measuring the gender-based development results across the United Nations system. In that regard, the Commission is contextualizing this methodology in line with its own results-based management framework. More specifically, SPOQD is consulting with UN Women and the operational inter-agency sub-working groups on gender mainstreaming to initiate a system-wide quality assurance process and develop guidelines for assessing gender-responsiveness.

As part of its overall compliance with the UN SWAP framework, ECA launched the Gender Marker in 2016. To that end, guidelines were developed, two commission-wide orientation sessions were organized for ECA staff and relevant quality control templates were shared. The baseline year for the Gender Marker reporting is 2016. Over the course of the year, the foundation for setting targets fora gender-responsive budget in the present and future planning cycles was layed out.

"Gender parity will become a clear priority from top to bottom in the UN. And it will have to be respected by all."
Mr. Antonio Guterres,
UN Secretary-General

Policy objective 6: Ensure that the ECA quality assurance function contributes effectively to building a competent organization

The rigourous implementation of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 supports the Commission's objective of being a reference think-tank on development policy issues in Africa. To that end, the annual ECA quality assurance report, the present report being the second in the series, is a major contributor, as it discusses the challenges, risks and lessons learned in implementing quality assurance practices in the Commission. The quality assurance function of ECA will only contribute effectively in building a competent organization if it is fit for purpose. This implies that the approved processes and tools should be appropriate — in the sense that the application of them would improve the quality of the Commission's products and services; would have the buy-in of staff; and are implemented systematically with the support of senior management. In 2016, lessons learned were used to improve quality assurance practices at ECA, with a focus on simplifying procedures and tools, raising awareness of staff and developing their capacity to use the procedures and tools.

Overall, the composition of quality assurance panels, the rigourous process in developing quality assurance procedures in-volving extensive and active participation of ECA staff and the inclusive manner in which the quality assurance capacity development workshop was organized all ensured that the ECA quality assurance function contributed to building the competence of the Commission in the period under review. Moreover, lessons from past experiences were used, for example, in the review of country profiles, as part of the effort to continuously improve quality assurance processes. Careful consideration was also taken to ensure that appropriate entry points were selected in deploying quality assurance tools for specific products and services. For instance, in the case of the Economic Report on Africa 2017, the quality assurance panel reviewed the version of the report that had gone through an internal review, which was open to all ECA staff. The recommendations of the panel was then fed into another review, this time by external experts, thereby ensuring a comprehensive and robust process. For the 2017 Conference of Ministers, the task force established for the conference was used as the entry point to assure the quality of the event. In that regard, it provided a platform for implementing a quality assurance action plan developed to deal with risks to the quality of the event.

Challenges and key lessons learned

Reference is made frequently to the Operational Quality Policy and Plan and its associated procedures, however the core of the ECA quality assurance function is its unwavering commitment to noting and implementing lessons that emerge from the development and application of quality assurance tools. A plethora of challenges were encountered throughout 2016. The degree to which those challenges affected the effectiveness and sustainability of the ECA quality function varied. At least one key lesson is associated with each challenge. Those lessons are discussed below in no particular order of significance.

Lesson #1: Demystifying the term "process" for effective application of quality assurance procedures.

The merit (intrinsic value) and worth (relative value) of a process are contested at best or overlooked at worst in the realm of results-based management, organizational development and their cognate fields of application. The world-wide obsession with results is rightfully not losing momentum — as the need to show value for money is at a record high amid tight resources. Nevertheless, the pathways and configuration of steps leading to those desired results receive disproportionately low attention among practitioners, including ECA staff. Regardless of their nature, urgency or magnitude, results that are outcomes or have an impact or both do not happen in a vacuum. Indeed, disregard for processes that underline the right routes and channels to the desired success jeopardizes the chances to achieve them in subsequent rounds.

Organizational culture, systems and institutional memory may be fuelling this lack of recognition and appreciation of processes. This sentiment was evident during the OQS Capacity Development Workshop on Quality Assurance, organized in September 2016. Findings from an interactive session at the workshop that solicited the views of the participants about the meaning of "process" were illuminating. In that regard, participants were found to have a common understanding of what process means. In a nutshell, the term refers to a road map for delivering an output or achieving an objective and entails having well-defined steps towards this targeted output or objective. Despite the commonality in their definitions, the participants differed in their levels of appreciation for process because of their particular acculturation with the term during their past or current lines of work. Some appeared to hold a negative view of process as it is believed to be associated with a heavy and cumbersome bureaucracy, hence adds little or no value to the quality of end products. This perceived heaviness is believed to be prolonging the completion of tasks that are often time-sensitive, explaining the respondents' general apathy towards cumbersome steps. A perceived dichotomy between "process" and "substance" emerged among this group of professional staff, most of whom prefer to identify themselves with the latter on the grounds that it better demonstrates one's technical knowledge and skills. Put differently, those staff members claim that their qualifications require them to focus on results that are almost synonymous with substance. The tendency to believe that process and substance are inherently mutually exclusive is cultivated over time through organizational practices and procedures that gradually yet surely undermine the value of paving the pathway towards impact.

A handful of ECA professional staff, on the other hand, showed deep appreciation for the term process and its associated procedures. Their appreciation is not unwarranted. In fact, literature abounds with evidence of the significance and impact of attention paid to processes on business or organizational effectiveness (Brockner, 2015). For a start, it is well-established that developing processes requires a global and well-rounded understanding and knowledge of the task(s) at hand and how they come about. Developing a process enables thorough identification of activities that add value to the nature of results as well as to those that mitigate risks (Patton, 2008; King, 2007; Stufflebeam, 2003). Using available resources through an established machinery helps in arriving at the desired destination. Moreover, it is argued in several studies that process reduces ambiguity and fosters accountability by transparently exposing the steps taken and decisions made by different individuals or groups. It also enhances democratic governance or organizational culture by identifying who and how these individuals participated and engaged in the activities that lead to a result that also might have influenced their lives. Processes can be likened to glue that holds the organizational structure together, giving a sense of control to its people over the results and also a feeling of ownership while achieving those results. This is called the IKEA effect in academic circles, whereby people place high value on an end product that they have created and feel a sense of accomplishment by successful completion of the tasks at hand (Norton, Mochon, and Ariely, 2012).

While the value of process in organizational effectiveness is well-established, obsession with process as a means to alleviate all potential risks might indeed risk adding waste and creating a quagmire and heavy bureaucracy that eventually hampers the achievement of results and depletes staff energy. Therefore, a fine balance needs to be struck between the number of steps needed to consistently achieve a targeted outcome and the resources at hand, most important of which is time.

Key messages that emerge from this discussion are the following:

1. Without processes, that is, the pathway or the configuration of activities or both, results can neither be consistently achieved nor successfully sustained;

2. Deep understanding and knowledge of the tasks at hand is a prerequisite for developing processes for intended outcomes, which is the actual testament to staff's skills and knowledge, known as substance;

3. Due attention to processes has positive spillover effects into the downstream of programme management. These include but are not limited to fostering accountability and transparency in implementation of approved organizational practices, increasing staff ownership of results and contributing to democratic engagement in realizing organizational vision;

4. The key to developing and following the right processes is to avoid the obvious trap of adding too many steps too soon that negates their value.

Lesson #2: ECA quality objectives are used to approve the release of major knowledge products, but for them to be used consistently, additional time is required and they need to be revised constantly.

The quality objectives of ECA are the core of the Commission's quality assurance function. These objectives have been operationalized by converting them into quantifiable criteria, which are contained in a review form, to be used by the quality review panels for major outputs. OQS Capacity Development Workshop on Quality Assurance, as discussed earlier, provided the first corporate-wide platform to discuss the merit and use of those criteria among professional staff. The form that contains the criteria is adjustable to accommodate the nature of the product or service. Panel members can select the quality objectives and criteria that are relevant to the output under review. This flexibility has been welcomed by the panel members and the interpretation and application of each quality objective and criterion has varied across review panels.

Quality reviews during 2016 highlighted that consultations and discussions pertaining to quality are increasingly using ECA quality objectives and associated criteria. This positive development points to a subtle yet significant change in the organizational culture towards systematization. However, the use of quality objectives and their interpretation, despite the quantifiable criteria, were found to differ depending on the panel and its members. The quality reviews of the country profiles, the proposed programme budget 2018–2019 and the Economic Report on Africa 2017 exhibited different practices. In some panels, quality objectives constituted the heart of discussions and the proceedings included thorough responses to each chosen quality objective and criterion. In others, discussions on quality objectives were fleeting, which raised concerns about the possibility of just providing lip-service. In panels in which quality objectives were thoroughly used, the ensuing discussions and reports were found to be more systematic, focused and evidence-based. This structured approach to quality assurance is not merely a function of bureaucratic

control, but indeed serves the needs of product owners as the feedback and resulting recommendations are succinct, unambiguous and justifiable. Other panels in which quality objectives were only mildly discussed for the sake of compliance appeared to have missed the opportunity to yield a well-rounded and anchored discussion centred on quality. The discussions led to subjective or less grounded feedback that brought about the following lessons:

1. ECA quality objectives serve the purpose of systematizing panel reviews of quality so that each corporate product and service is transparent and subject to the same criteria;

2. Awareness and knowledge about these objectives needs to be refreshed periodically to increase the likelihood of consistent uptake by all staff.

Lesson #3: Parallel structures divert attention from quality assurance panels and approved procedures.

The establishment of quality assurance panels is a significant milestone in building and sustaining a culture of quality at ECA and in entrenching results-based management in the Commission. The panels are constituted and convened for major products and services with a view to spread accountability for quality across the Commission and maintain independence in quality reviews while contributing new insights into the product or service at hand. Their major function is to cultivate the organizational culture of systematization, coherence and consistency throughout the life cycle of an output. These panels, however, in some cases, exist in tandem with other structures, such as committees that seem to operate a parallel or shadow quality assurance function. This may jeopardize efforts to establish one consistent system for quality assurance.

Developing a quality assurance function with the necessary components, including its policy, objectives, procedures and programme of work. requires ample time and energy, as it brings about significant changes to the way business is conducted. However sound and acceptable it may be, an overhaul of business usually is a time-consuming exercise. Residuals from the previous system may continue to lurk in the background and have a significant impact on currently proposed operations. This was the case in the review of the 2017 edition of the Economic Report on Africa. This flagship knowledge product is subject to an external quality assurance review as outlined in the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014 – 2017. Being a long-standing flagship

publication of the Commission, the quality of the report has always been taken seriously. The review structure and procedures that were put in place in the past continue to exist alongside the recently constituted quality assurance panel. Even though the quality assurance panel was established to merge and systematize quality assurance of the Economic Report on Africa, the review of the 2017 edition, to a large extent, followed the traditional approach. Internal and external reviews were held for the publication as was the case prior to the creation of the quality assurance panel. However, there was a difference in the sense that, for the first time, panel members provided extensive feedback on the publication's quality based on the quality objectives of ECA and their associated criteria, which were fed into the external review. While there is risk that simultaneously running parallel systems may lead to confusion and be detrimental to the organization's effectiveness, if their processes are opposing, it could also result in a more robust process if the systems complement each other, and if they are all in the framework of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017.

Valuable lessons learned from this experience are the following:

1. Parallel quality assurance functions or panels may contribute to varied understandings and fleeting appreciation of quality assurance, hence their merger and alignment in line with approved policies and procedures are urgently needed;

2. During the final year of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014–2017 before its renewal, a stocktaking exercise may prove beneficial for identifying shadow quality control mechanisms and proposing solutions for aligning them in the next operational quality policy and plan.

Lesson #4: Installation and internalization of a results-based management system is yet to be completed, which jeopardizes the timely and consistent implementation of quality assurance activities.

The Economic Commission for Africa, as part of the United Nations Secretariat, has adopted results-based management, in principle, in delivering its mandate, yet the integration of principles and procedures of results-based management into the structure and culture of ECA has been a challenge. This is partly due to the varying levels of under-

standing of results-based management guidelines among professional staff and the tight timelines to comply with those guidelines in delivering products and services. This has adversely affected the attention and value ascribed to quality assurance procedures of the Commission.

Negative connotations of quality assurance processes, as discussed previously, are a by-product of a lack of complete and coherent understanding of the programme management system of ECA. This is driven by two major factors. First, quality assurance is not a stand-alone function but, instead, it exists in relation to other major steps in programme management from planning to evaluation. Therefore, if and when professional staff entrusted with implementing the planned activities lack information on how their daily operations feed into the greater picture of the Commission's long-term development results and what role the quality assurance function plays in the grand scheme of the operations, their commitment to follow quality assurance procedures would tend to be shaky. Second and perhaps more important, the seeming lack of information about ECA programme management practices is partially driven by the absence of a practical comprehensive programme management manual. The manual that is currently being prepared is expected to deal with this challenge. However, this cannot be taken for granted as the familiarity of staff with existing manuals, guidelines and procedures appears to be low. This notwithstanding, the strength of the programme management manual in weaving together what seems to be siloed practices into a coherent system should not be underestimated. In its absence, the significance of quality control mechanisms throughout the programme management cycle is either contested or overlooked all together. It is anticipated that the compilation of the manual will lead to better understanding of how ECA programme orientation is executed and confirm the value of quality assurance activities in the process.

Key learnings from this discussion are the following:

1. An understanding of results-based management would facilitate consistent implementation of quality assurance activities;

2. The upcoming programme management manual will strengthen efforts to build a quality culture at ECA.

Lesson #5: Compliance with the Economic and Social Council guidelines on gender mainstreaming necessitates a creative and agile approach to programme management.

The Economic Commission for Africa strengthened its effort to comply with the Economic and Social Council initiatives on gender mainstreaming in 2016 by, for example, launching the Gender Marker — a tracking tool for estimating the amount and type of resources dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, piloting UN SWAP 2.0 and participating in conversations on the Gender Parity and Equality Strategy 2020. ECA emerged among United Nations entities as a champion in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and valuable lessons with profound implications for programme management were learned from the process.

First, gender mainstreaming is by nature a cross-cutting theme that has analytical and operational bearing on each step of results-based management. Analytically, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women should be a key criterion for planning, budgeting, implementing, evaluating and reporting to ultimately achieve equitable development results. Operationally, this criterion needs to be integrated into each results-based management- step through succinct procedures. As a result, efforts to mainstream gender generate their own processes and guidelines that seem to burden existing programme management guidelines. This runs the risk of undermining the value of such efforts.

Second, the launch of the Gender Marker in 2016 triggered a commission-wide conversation about the need to consistently track staff work months dedicated to each planned output. The Gender Marker requires a breakdown of staff time across outputs so that all resources are accounted for while estimating the organization's total financial commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women. The current ECA Annual Business Plan adopts a format conducive to capturing both gender marker codes[1] and funds dedicated to each output, yet it falls short of capturing staff time (work months) spent on those outputs.

Third, gender mainstreaming at ECA, like anywhere else, demands coherent coordination and communication within the organization. Currently, specific tasks for programme management (that is, the annual business plan, the Performance Management Dashboard, and budgeting,

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1 The ECA Gender Marker features a four-point scale to measure the extent to which an output makes contributions to gender equality and the empowerment of women. These are (3) essentially, (2) significantly, (1) partially, (0) not at all.

among others) are distributed to focal points. While some ECA entities have one focal point for all programme management-related issues including gender mainstreaming, others designate up to four different staff members to provide input to different segments of the programme cycle. Fragmentation in the focal point system (having different focal points for different programme management requirements) harms ongoing efforts to mainstream gender into the programme cycle as evidenced in reporting for the gender marker that requires coordination and information sharing between the annual business plan budget or administrative coordinators and gender focal points.

Key messages have emerged that merit immediate attention of all staff to sustain the ECA leadership role in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women:

1. Programme management processes, tools and procedures furnish the foundation for skillfully weaving gender into daily normative and operational work;

2. Ensuring that gender issues are accounted for at every step of programme management demands unambiguous procedures and flexibility to address evolving concerns and mandates;

3. The focal point system needs to be reviewed with the view to integrating gender into the programme of work in a coherent and holistic manner.

Way forward

The present report, similar to its predecessor in 2015, endeavours to systematically present the principles, processes and results of the quality assurance function at ECA, as well as the people involved in carrying out the function. Experience from briefings and evaluation data from the capacity development workshop organized in 2016 indicate that staff are now aware of the existence of a fully fledged quality assurance system in the Commission and its implications for their daily work. In the last three years since the development and approval of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, utmost attention has been given to developing a functional system and a culture of ownership of quality at the Commission. Cognizant of challenges encountered, lessons learned and risks identified, 2017 will mark the beginning of the revamping of the quality assurance function with a revised policy and plan.

The Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 foregrounded the quality assurance function at ECA, followed by procedures for specific products and services, a capacity development workshop and several briefings across the organization. Being the first commission-wide policy document on quality assurance, it was inherently subjected to piloting, testing, and continuous maneuvering while being implemented. Systematic recording of lessons about the strengths and shortcomings of the policy will enable it to be updated effectively throughout 2017 and then be reviewed and approved in early 2018. In addition to organizational lessons learned and challenges faced, the new policy and plan will be cognizant of the regional and global changes taking place that inevitably influences the corporate response of ECA, programme orientation and management. These socioeconomic, political and environmental changes will affect the very definition of and criteria for quality that the revamped policy and plan cannot afford to miss. Therefore, a thorough understanding and mapping of the anticipated changes to the organization and its external environment will be the first line of response. This mapping will give rise to further streamlining of procedures, tools and templates in an effort to articulate and operationalize the new meanings and applications of quality.

In the meantime, quality reviews of selected ECA products and services will continue as planned by way of consistently applying the ECA quality objectives and associated criteria. Refresher briefings and workshops will polish staff's memory and skills in applying the procedures.

While the efforts to upgrade the results-based management system at the Commission proceed, the quality assurance function with its well-developed system requirements and processes will lead the way in bringing the knowledge management and delivery functions coherently together in the service of African development policy priorities. It is still anticipated that practical and analytical conversations about the merit and worth of the quality assurance function will resume, facilitating the continuous improvement of the system. The quality assurance function is well-equipped and ready to provide continuous feedback into the system for its never-ending improvement.

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