The United Nations Programme of Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights

Craig G. Mokhiber*

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law...

Preamble, UDHR

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the most dramatic period of expansion and diversification in the history of the United Nations (UN) human rights programme. In no component of that programme is this point more obvious than in the area of technical cooperation. Prior to the late 1980s, the technical cooperation programme registered a mere one or two activities per year. By 1996, that number had risen to 402. Today, the programme...

* Deputy Director of the New York office for the UNHCHR

1 The unit of the UN Secretariat responsible for the human rights programme is the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (hereinafter OHCHR). Its predecessor was the UN Centre for Human Rights, which itself was preceded by the UN Division for Human Rights. For purposes of this chapter, OHCHR will be used for all general references, except where a specific organisational name appears as part of the title of a cited document or publication.

2 As the internationally accepted lexicon of this area of human rights work has evolved, the general term "technical cooperation" has replaced earlier expressions, such as "technical assistance" or "advisory services" in reference to the full range of activities described in this chapter. This is due to the more inclusive meaning of the term "technical cooperation", including as it does such particular activities as advisory services of experts, financial and material assistance, training and so on. The term also more adequately reflects the "cooperative" aspect, i.e. inclusive and equal partnership orientation of the UN's programme in this field.


4 See Commission on Human Rights, Fifty-third Session, Advisory Services in the Field of Human Rights, Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights, Report of the Secretary Gen-
is active in countries across the globe, and in virtually every development sector. As the once modest and little-used programme enters a new millennium of human rights promotion, it has emerged as a central mechanism of the organisation’s human rights strategy.

This development reflects, in part, the international community’s growing realisation that *post facto* interventions are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to meet the UN’s mandated human rights obligations. Undoubtedly, the monitoring of human rights conditions, through the various mechanisms described elsewhere in this book, has remained central to the UN’s protection mandate. Similarly, the development of more effective responses to evolving human rights crises has rightly begun to draw intense international attention. It would appear self-evident that where human dignity and human lives are at stake prevention must be seen both as a strategic priority and a moral imperative for the international community. Yet the technical cooperation programme remains one of the least known and least understood elements of UN strategy in this field.  

**Programme approach and objectives**

The principal objective of the technical cooperation programme is prevention, through the strengthening of domestic human rights capacity. While the mandate of the pro-

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5 While most often implemented in the context of preventive, i.e. future looking programmes of long-term capacity building, technical cooperation has also been employed to address existing human rights crises, and to contribute to the development of solutions to more immediate problems. This type of “applied” technical cooperation, intended to respond to immediate problems, was provided (e.g.) by the United Nations to the government of Malawi in 1993; *See e.g.* United Nations Centre for Human Rights, *Report of the Needs Assessment Mission to Malawi*, 28 August to 6 September 1993; *see also* United Nations Centre for Human Rights, *Report of the Mission to Advise the Office of the Special Prosecutor of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia*, July 1994, available from the files of the Secretariat.

6 This seems all the more puzzling given that the technical cooperation programme is perhaps the best documented of all UN human rights activities. The programme publishes a comprehensive annual report to the Commission on Human Rights, covering all programme activities, and regularly issues various technical documents, including quarterly status reports of the Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights (see *e.g.* UNVFTC) QSRA/I-9); a methodological compilation entitled *UN Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights: Guidelines, Formats and Procedures* (UNVFTC/GFP/July 1996); and countless needs assessment, project formulation, project monitoring and project evaluation reports, all available from the Secretariat. For further study, *see also* United Nations, *Human Rights Fact Sheet No. 3 (Rev.1): Advisory Services and Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights*. Finally, up-to-date information on the programme is available from the United Nations Human Rights website, accessible on the internet at <www.ohchr.org>.

7 *Technical cooperation in the field of human rights* may be defined, for our purposes, as the application of international resources and expertise to national, regional or local human rights needs and challenges, through cooperative agreements between domestic institutions