

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING-GROUP  
XXXX MEETING**

**Rome ~ 17-18 February 2000**

**THE COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT  
FOR THE SELECTION OF RESIDENT COORDINATORS (RCS)  
STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND OPTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

**I. Background**

1. The competency-based assessment programme was initiated in Turin in November 1998. It represents an attempt to provide a tool for the qualitative assessment of the suitability of candidates nominated by participating organisations to serve as UN Resident Coordinators (RCs). The assessment is also envisaged to be used by United Nations staff members who aspire to be RCs. It was not conceived as a pass-fail test, but rather to be used as one of three criteria (performance and experience being the others) for selecting RCs.
2. The assessment procedure involves a series of simulation exercises designed to allow the measurement of the behavioural aptitude of candidates against 13 competencies. These competencies are grouped into two tiers, with the second being primarily management competencies (see Tables I and II). The distinction between the Tiers is used primarily in compiling a candidate's final overall score, with Tier 1 competencies having the greater weight.
3. Since 1998 a total of 95 candidates have undertaken the competency assessment in three exercises, in Turin (November 1998) and Pittsburgh (May/June 1999 and November 1999). Of the 72 candidates who completed the first two exercises and for whom data is available, 51 were men and 21 women. 37 of the 72 came from UNDP and 35 from 14 other agencies. Excluding UNDP, 22 came from 7 IASC member agencies.
4. Approximately half of the candidates receive a final overall Competency Assessment evaluation of "Likely to Need Substantial Development". After receiving the results of their performance, and with the agreement of their agency, those candidates who wish to do so can apply for consideration by the Inter-Agency Assessment Panel to be placed in the pool of agreed potential Resident Coordinators. Of the 72 candidates who have gone through the competency assessment, 28 have been included in the Pool for RCs. Of these 28, 21 of these are men and 7 women. Four came from non-IASC members, 19 came from UNDP and only 5 from 4 other IASC member agencies. Hence, overall, the Pool has a limited number of candidates with humanitarian experience.
5. The Competency Assessment process is currently being evaluated by consultants, including interviews with key staff of the various agencies who have sent candidates

through the Assessment process. The final report of this evaluation should be available during February.

## **II. Strengths of the Competency Assessment**

6. The Competency Assessment has a number of strengths. One is the effort at impartiality, and providing a “level playing field” to all candidates. The Assessment itself is conceived of as being an impartial and impersonal instrument operated by a group of personnel who have no vested interest in the process except to discharge a professional undertaking.
7. A related point is that the Assessment seeks to measure skills, not specific knowledge. A strong effort is made to avoid basing the simulations on knowledge for which only one segment of the candidates would have a strong base (e.g. development issues, or UNDP procedures).
8. Since the RC structure is a common UN system, the readiness to open it up to all the members through the assessment process is a welcome and positive gesture that augurs well for a rich, diverse and wide base of representation in this strategic UN position.

## **III. Weaknesses of the Competency Assessment**

9. In its two years of operation, a number of concerns have arisen regarding the fairness, effectiveness and relevance of the Competency Assessment. One regards whether the Assessment includes the full range of competencies that a Resident Coordinator should possess, and in particular those that would be required should he/she also serve as Humanitarian Coordinator. Among the additional overall competencies (most of which are also included among those identified by OHRM as being desired competencies of UN staff in general) would be Accountability, Creativity, Client Orientation, Commitment to Continuous Learning, Technological Awareness, and Empowering Others. Of vital relevance to Humanitarian Coordinators would be Flexibility, Versatility, Ability to Operate Under Pressure, Crisis Management, Team Work and Vision.
10. There are also problems that may be inherent to the nature of simulation exercises. One is that some of the most important competencies, such as ability to operate under pressure (and even personal danger), are very hard to simulate. Another is that simulations measure primarily observable behaviours. Thus, they do not primarily measure results achieved. In addition, the behavioural focus biases simulations against candidates who achieve good results via less visible and vocal behaviours (e.g. through leading by example, building good relationships via more informal contacts, or by leading via demonstrated excellence in analysis and decision-making). There is also a concern by some observers that this particular simulation programme has grown out of a US-based corporate culture, and is not fully adapted to that of the UN.
11. The use of the Assessment exercise results appears to have *de facto* changed from being one of three criteria used for evaluating potential Resident Coordinators, to

being a pass-fail hurdle that one must pass in order for one's prior performance and relevant experience to then be considered. Only one-two persons who have received overall Assessment score in the "Likely to Need Substantial Development" category have been approved into the RC pool based on their actual performance and experience. This pass-fail bar appears to have been set very high, with half of the candidates selected by nominating agencies to take the Assessment falling into this "fail" category. This situation, combined with the concern that few candidates with humanitarian experience are being approved into the pool, gives reason to consider the need for greater flexibility in using the results of the Assessment exercise (relative to the other two criteria) and perhaps to consider whether the bar has been set too high, given the overall weaknesses of the Assessment undertaking.

12. A final concern of many of the nominating agencies is that the costs per candidate, currently \$8,000 is too high for the number of final Resident Coordinator candidates being added to the pool.

#### **IV. Possible Options for Improvement**

13. The RC system is open to the UN system, and it is in the vested interest of the IASC member agencies to ensure that the RC pool is broadened and strengthened to ensure that individuals with strong Humanitarian Coordinator skills are included in the pool. Thus, the IASC-Working Group is requested to consider the following recommendations:
  - a) IASC Members engage intensively in reviewing the forthcoming recommendations of the Evaluation Report of the Competency Assessment to ensure that major humanitarian issues and concerns have been incorporated in the exercise.
  - b) IASC Members appoint focal points within their respective organisations to work closely with the members of the UNDGO's Inter-Agency Advisory Panel (IAAP) in revising the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation of the Competency Assessment.
  - c) IASC Members agree to commit themselves to nominate an agreed targeted number of candidates annually to undergo the Competency Assessment Exercise to enrich the RC pool with candidates with humanitarian experience.
  - d) IASC Members should ensure that successful candidates who have completed the Competency Assessment are recommended for the RC pool.
  - e) IASC Members should, through the IASC/ECHA Secretariat, keep each other informed on their respective progress in the Competency Assessment process and the Secretariat will from time to time inform the membership of achievements and constraints.