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OPS on its Own

5.1 Introduction

Beyond developing a strategy and reforming, OPS staff still had many other things to do. They had to continue their normal work in service delivery, while attempting to address client confusion about OPS’ future. However, staff could not fully resolve this confusion; they themselves did not know what was going to happen. In addition, they had to continue the preparations for the possible merger with DDSMS. After the last Governing Council meeting, the Secretariat and the government representatives were strongly aware of the problems surrounding the merger. It had also become increasingly clear to them that it was necessary to make a decision on OPS’s status soon. This chapter describes the decision-making processes concerning the merger, as well as the final outcome, and the consequences for OPS and its relationships with other UN organizations.

5.2 A sea change

During the last Governing Council session that proposed to let OPS remain within UNDP for one more year, the Council also asked the Secretary-General to ‘clarify further the arrangements for the transfer’ of OPS to DDSMS (Decision 93/46, 16 December 1993). In May 1994 – that is, after the Leaky Boat exercise – the Secretary-General submitted a response to the Executive Board (DP/1994/27). The merger was still on. This report was written by the task force that had also written the other reports (see Chapter 3, p. 40). The report outlined the ‘Institutional and administrative arrangements concerning the Office for Project Services’ and was sent to the Executive
Board. By this time, the OPS members of the task force felt that they were only there to correct the grammar of the reports. OPS staff were also afraid that DDSMS had designs on the positions at OPS, which led to more subterranean opposition. The Board, still cautious, did not accept the new arrangements. Instead, it deferred their consideration until its Annual Session, due to take place in Geneva in June 1994.

Before this Annual Session, the Secretary-General (or, more accurately, staff-members of the Secretariat) made an about-face. Resistance by member governments and fears about loss of OPS' flexibility had grown too much. In a new report, the Secretary-General restated his intention that UNDP should fulfill its coordinating role for the operational activities of the UN system in an impartial manner. OPS, as part of UNDP, posed an inherent conflict in this respect, because of its implementation function. But the Secretary-General was ‘extremely concerned by the continuing uncertainty, which [he understood, was] shared by the member states’ (DP/1994/52: 2). He therefore proposed a new solution, namely:

to establish the Office for Project Services as a separate identity headed by an Assistant Secretary-General as the responsible manager under the authority of the Secretary-General. He/she would be responsible and accountable for the day-to-day management of the Office. The Executive Director would report on the activities of OPS to the UNDP Executive Board. (DP/1994/52: 2)

The report also suggested establishing a Management Coordination Committee (MCC). ‘The Administrator of UNDP, the Under-Secretary-General for Development Support and Management Services and the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management would serve as members of the Committee. The Executive Director would serve as Secretary of the Committee’ (DP/1994/52: 2). This proposal added another layer between OPS and the Executive Board. It resembled an institutional leftover of both UNDP and the proposed merger by inserting a modicum of supervisory control by DDSMS and UNDP. In addition, the report proposed the establishment of an Advisory Committee of Users ‘to provide feedback to OPS on the effectiveness of its operations as perceived by the major users within the United Nations system’ (DP/1994/52: 3).

The proposal also provided a broad outline for the new relationship with UNDP: ‘Administrative support for OPS would continue to be