

**STRENGTHENING  
POLICY RESEARCH UPTAKE  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE  
2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

*Prepared by*

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**United Nations, Geneva 2018**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Strengthening policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

JIU/REP/2018/7

#### **Context: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

The present report intends to acknowledge the role of research as a unique asset of the United Nations system, elevate its visibility and find ways to make its production and uptake more efficient and transparent.

The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) has never conducted before a review of the policy research function in the United Nations system and could not find any comprehensive assessments of research policies and activities. While the major conceptual products, such as flagship publications and other research products of a global scope, represent a highly visible interface between the United Nations system and Governments, universities and the public at large, its internal research processes are rather opaque and have never been considered major organizational vectors by decision-makers. Many United Nations organizations put their own specific stamp on research products when they disseminate the most relevant information about their work, strategic thinking and vision on global issues in order to create impact; however, the production, costs and uptake of research have not been considered by policymakers with the attention and transparency they deserve.

It is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its universal, holistic and integrative approach that cuts across all dimensions of sustainable development, which makes collaborative actions and interdisciplinary approaches at the system-wide level, as well as relationships with other stakeholders, imperative. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires, among other things, evidence-based policies and planning at all levels. Adequate research uptake is essential in order to comprehend the dynamic trends in economic, social and environmental developments and to anticipate and prevent emerging challenges by channelling and supporting critical thinking in policy debates.

The present report aims to raise awareness regarding the importance of the research function in support of a transformative agenda for sustainable development. It argues for the need to better hear the voices of researchers in decision-making.

More importantly, the implementation of the recommendations contained in the present report will hopefully lead to the strengthening of the role of the United Nations system as a creator, catalyst and distributor of trusted, objective and reliable research.

#### **Objectives and scope**

The overall objective of the review is to offer evidence on the uptake of policy research, identify gaps and overlaps in research cycles and outline ways for the United Nations system

to produce and use research more effectively, in particular in support of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. More specifically, the present review aims to:

- Examine institutional configurations for policy research (policy frameworks, guidance, quality assurance procedures and processes) to manage efficient policy research
- Assess internal capacities to determine the adequacy and effectiveness of existing uptake policies
- Identify factors, determinants and challenges related to policy research uptake in the United Nations system
- Solicit and bring to the fore qualified views of external audiences, in particular the academic community, on the use of policy research products in the United Nations system, as a vector for dialogue and partnerships
- Assess opportunities and make recommendations to leverage current internal capacities for enhanced and sustained partnerships with academic and research communities
- Identify potential opportunities for more coordinated efforts on policy research across the United Nations system and recommend measures aimed at realizing them

The scope of the present review does not include an assessment of the quality of any research products listed in the report, nor is it an attempt to measure the actual impact of all research produced in the United Nations system. Such a goal might be the object of a future review once the recommendations made in this report are implemented. Only institutional configurations, mechanisms, policies and processes that can strengthen policy research uptake are examined.

## Concepts

In the absence of a widely known and accepted definition, for the purposes of this review, the concept of policy research uptake encompasses all activities that: (a) support the supply of research by ensuring that research topics are relevant through engagement with intended users, communicating research effectively and synthesizing and repackaging research for different audiences; and (b) support the use of research by building the capacity of research users, in particular policymakers, to access, evaluate, synthesize and use evidence. As the last stage of the research function, the premises of its efficiency are embedded in the previous stages (research agenda-setting, choice of research products, quality control, mainstreaming and integration and communication).

The research-related concepts, as used throughout the current report, should be understood as follows:

- Research: the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data, information and knowledge to increase the understanding of a topic
- Policy research: research whose purpose is to support and inform decision-making and to influence policies and actions
- Research function: the entirety of organizational activities in a research cycle, as supported by organizational policies, mechanisms and resources
- Research products: publications that contain the research findings, as categorized and defined by the organizations

### **Why is policy research needed?**

The demand for policy research across organizations in the United Nations system responds to various needs, differentiated by the nature of their respective mandates and responsibilities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the specific necessities related to programmes and projects, changes in strategies and adaptation to the dynamics of the operating environment. Beyond such differences, there are several organizational objectives for which the support of policy research is essential:

- To generate evidence that can inform and guide policy, programming and advocacy, shape priorities and support operational activities
- To collect and analyse data in order to identify and monitor trends, patterns and emerging issues in an objective and trusted manner
- To make available relevant criteria for decision-making
- To understand barriers and opportunities, and articulate evidence-based policymaking options
- To understand and support the development of norms and standards, and guidelines and codes of practice
- To help enhance the standing of the United Nations as an authoritative and responsive source of knowledge

The needs of member States are fundamental to setting research agendas. The constant review of research mandates, as well as the need to ensure clear reporting lines, are also necessary to enhance the efficiency of research processes. The lack of such support in decision-making can lead to the duplication of efforts and activities and to fragmentation and inconsistency in approaches to the same policy area or in understanding the needs of member States. It can also lead to lack of awareness regarding the entire picture of a particular policy challenge, insufficient ability to share findings of common interest and loss of time and resources, as well as increase the risk of making poor decisions.

### **A double focus**

Successful policy research uptake in the United Nations system depends on the convergence of both internal and external factors that contribute, during the entire research cycle, to the quality and relevance of the final products, as well as on the relationship between the suppliers and the users of research, including non-United Nations protagonists.

Mapping and documenting how organizations produce policy research *internally*, in particular by determining the adequacy of quality assurance, was the first area of interest for the review. The report highlights good practices aimed at enhancing the quality of research, improving staff incentives and rewarding innovative and independent research production and uptake.

The other area of interest was the actual use by the United Nations system of the SDGs relevant research produced *externally*, by universities and other research entities. By consulting major academic networks, the report generated reflections and out-of-the-box insights on the existing challenges and possible solutions from different perspectives.

### **Main findings on internal research production**

The policy research landscape of United Nations system entities is extremely diverse. The review shows considerable *variations in the way organizations comprehend and operationalize research* activities. This heterogeneity - inherent to organizations with different internal capacities and resources - is compounded by programmatic/operational requirements that vary markedly, with some organizations being heavily research-based and oriented towards capacity-building, while others fulfil operational functions.

In some decentralized organizations, *the quality assurance for policy research and uptake is not consistent throughout the organization*. The headquarters of an entity may not always be aware of research undertaken at the field level. Limited coordination between the former and the country offices, and among technical experts, communication experts and operating units, can also pose risks to dissemination and uptake, including the fragmentation or duplication of efforts and resources, inconsistencies and a lack of coherence.

Guidelines and policies on the cycle of production, quality assurance and the dissemination of research, where they do exist, are necessary but not sufficient. *Research processes are not always integrated into the strategic vision of the organization*. The vision and actions for research uptake, developed to ensure that findings are read and validated by a broader audience and have an impact, are not always envisaged in policy research planning. There is also little transparency regarding the costs of research in terms of human and financial resources.

For many research products there was little clarity, and even *divergent opinions*, among interlocutors of the JIU, *with regard to what fell under the category of policy research*. While the Inspector acknowledges that the divergence of opinions corresponds to, and in some cases may satisfy, the specific research needs of organizations, the lack of horizontal clarity among staff may also reflect the absence of corporate guidance and transparent agenda-setting.

The current *monitoring frameworks for policy research uptake are not entirely suitable for capturing the use and relevance of research products*. With a few notable exceptions, the review team failed to identify assessments or any form of substantive feedback channel or follow-up on policy uptake by their respective target audiences in the long term. Monitoring was usually limited to quantitative measurements. Even when uptake surveys were taken, they did not adequately capture the findings, nor did they disaggregate the responses according to the target groups. Performance indicators on uptake were not always anchored in clearly defined benchmarks; instead, they seemed to reflect what organizations thought they could achieve based on previous experience.

Most organizations have not successfully determined how to best utilize existing capacities for policy research uptake, although such capacities do exist. Staff exposed to both research and policy roles tend to have a better understanding of the dynamics of policy-relevant research. However, the *insufficiency of internal skills' mapping for uptake leads organizations to seek resources externally, rather than incentivizing and training their own staff*.

While research is meant to lead to innovation and transformation, the policy research agenda is dominated by safe or less controversial topics, recurrent themes and the replication of existing ideas, including with respect to the choice of research topics and methods. Research managers often follow bureaucratic imperatives rather than incentivizing United Nations staff to carry out research. Sometimes, the administrative imperatives prevail over intellectual autonomy.

\* \* \*



The above findings do not imply that there are no good practices across the United Nations system. Admittedly, the good practices cannot be replicated as such, in view of the differences among the mandates, resources and specific needs of individual organizations. Nevertheless, the report identified and highlighted some good practices in the hope that they will at least inspire other organizations to do more with existing means.

All things considered, the Inspector believes that a movement towards more efficient uptake, based on a *few guiding principles and modus operandi for communication and collaboration*, would lead all United Nations organizations to act as a system-wide research network.

### **Main findings on the use of externally produced policy research: academic perspectives**

In order to complement the findings from the participating organizations of the JIU, perspectives from academic communities were collected through a perception survey and a mini-questionnaire, which were disseminated for the Unit by five global academic networks in a praiseworthy spirit of partnership. A total of 492 researchers, university teachers and social and political scientists responded. The twin objectives of the academic consultation were to identify ways for the United Nations system to *make the best use of external knowledge resources* and to *build bridges with the academic community*.

#### Overall perception

A majority of respondents believed their access to United Nations resources was either insufficient or non-existent (46.3 per cent and 11.4 per cent, respectively), while 30.6 per cent of respondents said they had satisfactory access to United Nations interlocutors and information.

There is real interest on the part of the academic community in the 2030 Agenda and the vision behind it. A majority of respondents agreed that their organizations systematically or selectively reflected Sustainable Development Goals in their research agendas (28.8 per cent and 46.3 per cent, respectively).

However, respondents believed that their research products were far from being well used: over 60 per cent of respondents reckoned that the United Nations system had used academic research products insufficiently or not at all.

Asked about the influence of external research on United Nations decision-making and norm-setting, the majority of respondents (62.1 per cent) felt that the research had insufficient or no influence at all.

#### Challenges

- There is a lack of strategy and support/resources from the research side to streamline knowledge in a format that is fit for uptake;
- There is a preference in the United Nations system for consultancy, and limited interest in or even fear of debate regarding areas of uncertainty that are central to the pertinence of research contribution;
- United Nations research is disproportionately solicited from and produced by universities and research centres in the global North, instead of building the national capacities of countries in the global South and working with their researchers to support the finding of solutions to the problems of their countries;

- Researchers face difficulties in navigating United Nations bureaucracy and politics and in overcoming the United Nations confidentiality constraints – an inhibiting factor that is compounded by the absence of a signalling mechanism for the United Nations that can communicate its research needs to the academic community;
- Knowledge management systems within the United Nations are inadequate to guide staff in finding and using relevant external research;
- There is a lack of transparency and openness in the selection of research topics and researchers;
- There is an absence of systematic and predictable processes, practices and frameworks connecting the United Nations system and academic communities for research projects regarding the 2030 Agenda.

The academic survey provided substantive views on the characteristics of efficient policy research uptake and suggestions for desirable forms of institutionalized interaction and partnerships. Such partnerships would facilitate better understanding of perspectives and sharing of concerns, and would frame and develop a common language towards solutions. They would also allow academic knowledge to be planned and developed more consistently in view of its policy relevance, while allowing United Nations agencies to involve the scholarly community on a regular basis.

\* \* \*

#### **Case study: research on migration**

During the review, the Inspector found numerous examples of the use of research outcomes for decision-making and action on the Sustainable Development Goals. A single topic - migration - was chosen as a thematic lens in order to illustrate a case of multidisciplinary scope of the policy research function within the broader 2030 Agenda framework.

As migration is a global, multifaceted and multilayered issue, the Inspector thought that relevant conclusions could be useful, through projection and deconstruction, to conceptualize research needed for other complex Sustainable Development Goal areas. Such areas would have two features in common: the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and the imperative for inter-agency cooperation in research. For the particular context of the current review, and on the basis of the information collected through an additional special questionnaire on migration, the two criteria have been contextualized as follows:

- *Interdisciplinary research*, which implies that migration touches not only on the thematic mandate of some leading agencies, such as the International Organization for Migration, but also impinges on the multifaceted concerns and activities of other United Nations organizations.
- *Collaborative research*, which implies co-design, co-production and co-use, or at least a systematic and institutionalized process of consultation among agencies.

The analysis of the case study on migration allowed the Inspector to qualify the current developments on migration as a good practice, as they showed that such criteria might be applicable to other areas of interest pertaining to the 2030 Agenda, and to extract three basic conclusions:

- The collaborative research reflects, by and large, the necessity of adding an interdisciplinary perspective to research activities;
- The current collaboration scheme is more a result of separate initiatives and case-by-case needs than a systematic process of collaboration characterized by joint agenda-setting, knowledge-sharing and the co-design and co-production of research;

- While various undertakings do not necessarily converge in the same direction, there is an emerging trend towards more systematic collaborative research.

\* \* \*

The report presents 12 recommendations, addressed as follows: recommendation 10 to the General Assembly; recommendation 3 to the Economic and Social Council; recommendation 9 to the governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations; recommendations 5, 6, 7 and 12 to the Secretary-General; recommendation 11 to the Secretary-General and the Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and recommendations 1, 2, 4 and 8 to the Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations.

*Recommendation addressed to the General Assembly*

### **Recommendation 10**

**The General Assembly should take measures to elevate the representation and the use of policy briefs produced by the specialized research entities of the United Nations system, based upon a report to be submitted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, at the latest during its seventy-fourth session (2019-2020).** (page 51)

*Recommendation addressed to the Economic and Social Council*

### **Recommendation 3**

**The Economic and Social Council should request a comprehensive review of the research agenda of the regional commissions with respect to their research priorities, including partnering and resources allocated, in view of their role as think tanks in the context of the 2030 Agenda.** (page 16)

*Recommendation addressed to governing bodies*

### **Recommendation 9**

**The governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should take measures to ensure that commitments to inter-agency collaboration, including through the establishment of a global data knowledge platform and the facilitation of academic exchanges, as stipulated in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, are implemented by the end of 2020.** (page 43)

*Recommendations addressed to the Secretary-General*

### **Recommendation 5**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations should extend his commitment to assess the work of research and training institutes and include the research work of other United Nations system organizations, in the light of the system-wide findings and recommendations made in the present report.** (page 17)

### **Recommendation 6**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should consider calling on the Executive Heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so to**

**establish a system-wide policy on open data access, supporting software and research-sharing among the United Nations system organizations.** (page 34)

#### **Recommendation 7**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Executive Heads of other United Nations system organizations should review the level of involvement of researchers from the South and adopt policies and frameworks that will stimulate capacity-building for all dimensions of the policy research functions, including research uptake at the national level, and report thereon to the General Assembly and to the governing bodies, respectively, by the end of 2020.** (page 36)

#### **Recommendation 12**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in consultation with all Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations, should encourage long-term partnerships with academic communities at the global, regional and national levels, and establish basic guidelines for such partnerships.** (page 61)

*Recommendation addressed to the Secretary-General  
and to the Director General of UNESCO*

#### **Recommendation 11**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director General of UNESCO should consider the creation, on an experimental and voluntary basis, of a United Nations – Academic Joint Publication Board with the task of identifying research needs at the system-wide level and the most efficient ways to produce, disseminate and uptake policy research in a collaborative and participatory manner, by the end of 2020 at the latest.** (page 61)

*Recommendations addressed to the Executive Heads*

#### **Recommendation 1**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations that do not have research guidelines and policies in place should consider establishing, as appropriate, a minimum set of standards on research production and uptake by the end of 2021.** (page 10)

#### **Recommendation 2**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should establish, in the set-up of their programme budgets and finance (cost accounting) systems, a means to report on the cost of research activities by the end of 2020.** (page 14)

#### **Recommendation 4**

**The Executive Heads of United Nations system organizations should carry out periodic assessments of specific research needs and of potential suppliers of research products and**

**associated costs, with the long-term objective of strengthening internal capacities for research, as appropriate, and making systematic use of research produced by academia.**  
(page 17)

### **Recommendation 8**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations involved in the United Nations Network on Migration should instruct the relevant units to assess the options of inter-agency collaboration, on the basis of converging interests and specific competencies, with regard to decision-making on migration-related research projects, by the end of 2019.**  
(page 41)

\* \* \*

Taking into account both the diversity of the research landscape and the need for further measures to improve policy research uptake, the Inspector has also addressed to the Executive Heads of the United Nations organizations the following **soft recommendations**:

- To take measures to ensure and strengthen the functional link between research on the one hand, and policy development on the other, within the organizations, at all levels, in order to facilitate relevance and efficiency in decision-making (para. 60)
- To consider the use of internal databases as knowledge-sharing platforms for any ongoing and completed research in order to minimize duplication and enhance opportunities for dissemination and uptake (para. 61)
- To make sure that the specific contributions of policy research in decision-making are clearly enunciated at the organizational level, including with respect to the role and use of each distinct category of research product (para. 101)
- To perform reviews of the functions of publications committees, or, where such committees do not exist, to develop plans that set out accountability for quality assurance (para. 120)
- To consider, within the frameworks they deem appropriate, integrating an external peer review process as a mandatory step of the policy research cycle, with a view to strengthening quality assurance processes (para. 119)
- To give priority to internally available capacity for the monitoring of research frameworks, with a view to maximizing potential to improve uptake and reduce costs (para. 134)
- To ensure a systematic approach towards tracking and documenting progress on research uptake at the system-wide level and determine feedback channels within organizations (para. 155)
- To adopt a long-term vision for research that rewards the creation of new knowledge products and instils a culture of pushing boundaries, versus recurrent, short-term successes (para. 217)
- To revisit the rules and regulations related to the publication in specialized journals of the research findings of interested staff, so as to eliminate undue restrictions and conditions and to encourage the staff to engage in research and publishing activities (para. 245)
- To seek the views of academia and to engage in strategic dialogue with external researchers and research institutions with a view to collaboratively analysing challenges of a systemic nature (para. 256)
- To stimulate interested staff to write – from their professional perspective – book reviews, thus disseminating the findings of research conducted by academics and researchers (para. 257)

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ACUNS	Academic Council on the United Nations
CEB	United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination
CNRS	Centre national de la recherche scientifique
DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
ECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HLCP	High Level Committee on Programmes
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
ISA	International Studies Association
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNICRI	United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSSC	United Nations System Staff College
UNU	United Nations University
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization

UPU	Universal Postal Union
WASD	World Association for Sustainable Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization



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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background

1. As part of its programme of work for 2018, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) included a review on “Strengthening policy research uptake in service of the 2030 Agenda”. The review stems from the need for the United Nations system to improve policy research functions and policies by strengthening uptake mechanisms through enabling factors such as reinforcing internal capacities and improving collaboration with academia. That need was singled out for the first time by a round table, co-organized in 2016 by the United Nations University and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, on strengthening United Nations research uptake. The premise underpinning this system-wide review is that research processes in the United Nations system should be purposeful, relevant and impactful.

2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development heightens the imperative for more efficient policy research uptake. The Secretary-General indicated his determination to strengthen the system’s capacity for policy advice, research and production of evidence.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the 2030 Agenda, in its universal, holistic, and integrative approach, cuts across all dimensions of sustainable development and implies more collaboration and interdisciplinarity at the system-wide level and in relationships with other stakeholders. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires, among other things, informed prioritization and planning at the national and regional levels and evidence-based policies. Adequate research uptake is essential in order to comprehend the dynamic trends in economic and social development and thereby better anticipate and prevent emerging challenges by channelling critical thinking in policy debates.

3. In the absence of a widely known and accepted definition, for the purposes of the present review, the concept of policy research uptake<sup>2</sup> includes all activities that:

- (a) Support the supply of research by ensuring that research topics are relevant through engagement with intended users, communicating research effectively and synthesizing and repackaging research for different audiences;
- (b) Support the use of research by building the capacity of research users, in particular policymakers, to access, evaluate, synthesize and use evidence.

4. The policy research landscape of United Nations system entities is extremely diverse. A comparative desk review of organizational normative bases on policy research against strategic plans, policies and guidelines showed considerable variation in the way organizations comprehend and operationalize their research activities. This heterogeneity - inherent to organizations with different degrees of internal capacities and resources - is compounded by programmatic/operational requirements that vary markedly: some organizations are heavily research-based and oriented towards capacity-building, while others fulfil operational functions.

5. Efficient policy research frameworks are important components of an organization’s accountability and integrity with regard to research production and uptake. After all, for many United Nations organizations, the research products, addressed to either their member States or the public at

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, ECOSOC, *Repositioning the United Nations system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda* – ensuring a better future for all, doc. A/72/124-E/2018/3.

<sup>2</sup> Definition adapted from the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as identified in its guidance note entitled, “Research uptake: a guide for DFID-funded research programmes”, 2016.

large, often represent their most visible deliverables. The present report is the first attempt to assess the current state of affairs in a more comprehensive and systematic manner and to identify flaws, inconsistencies and shortcomings in existing policies and practices that describe policy research uptake.

6. Mapping and documenting how organizations produce policy research internally, in particular by determining the adequacy of quality assurance, was the first area of interest for the review. The report sought to highlight good practices, aiming at bettering the quality of research, improving staff incentives and rewarding innovative and independent research production and uptake.

7. The other area of interest was the actual use by the United Nations system of research relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals produced externally by universities and other research institutions. To contextualize how the academic community perceives the way the United Nations uses research, the report generated reflections and out-of-the-box insights on existing challenges and possible solutions through the first United Nations survey among academics regarding policy research uptake in the system.

### **B. Scope and objectives**

8. The scope of the present review is system-wide and covers the United Nations Secretariat, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and specialized research entities.

9. The overall objective of the review is to offer evidence on the uptake of policy research, identify gaps and overlaps in research cycles and outline possible ways for the United Nations system to produce and use research more effectively in service of the 2030 Agenda. The report assesses the effectiveness of mechanisms in place to capture the uptake of research, critically analyses how research outputs are perceived and utilized and assesses opportunities to enhance visibility and valorize policy research in the United Nations system. More specifically, the present review aims to:

- Examine institutional configurations for policy research (policy frameworks, guidance, quality assurance procedures and processes) to manage efficient policy research
- Assess internal capacities to ascertain the effectiveness of existing uptake policies
- Identify factors, determinants and challenges related to policy research uptake in the United Nations system
- Solicit and bring to the fore qualified views of external audiences, in particular the academic community, on the use of policy research products in the United Nations system, as a vector for dialogue and partnerships
- Assess opportunities and make recommendations to leverage current internal capacities for enhanced and sustained partnerships with academic and research communities
- Identify potential opportunities for more coordinated efforts on policy research across the United Nations system and recommend measures aimed at realizing them

10. The review examined migration as a case study on the process of producing, utilizing, disseminating and sharing migration-related research. The topic was chosen as a thematic lens to illustrate the multidisciplinary scope of the policy research function within a broader 2030 Agenda framework. Fourteen United Nations entities that categorized themselves as organizations that undertook research on or whose work related to migration, responded to a separate, specially designed JIU questionnaire.

11. The review did not include views from the main users of the United Nations research products, the member States. The primary reasons, among others, were the absence of a specific line of reporting

on policy research to member States, and the scarcity of data on the use of research products by various governmental agencies. Only two of the organizations under review conducted surveys to that effect.

12. The existing institutional and formal mechanisms dealing with scientific research in areas of natural sciences (climate changes, biodiversity, atomic energy, etc.) were not included in the scope of the review.

### **C. Methodology**

13. The review was conducted from February to December 2018 on a United Nations system-wide basis. In addition to the 28 participating organizations of the JIU, the United Nations University (UNU) and its affiliated institutes, as well as specialized research and training entities (the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)) were invited to participate. Two specialized research units, the Office of Research – Innocenti of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also contributed to the review.

14. On an exceptional basis, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) generously agreed to share its feedback and opinions in the review, in particular with respect to the case study on matters related to migration research.

15. Twenty-four participating organizations of the JIU, nine entities of the United Nations Secretariat (the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat (DESA), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations(DPKO)/Department of Field Support (DFS), the Department of Public Information (DPI), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)) and two United Nations research entities (UNU and UNRISD) responded to the questionnaire.<sup>3</sup>

16. In accordance with JIU internal standards, guidelines and working procedures, this system-wide review was conducted in a consultative manner. The methodology followed in preparing the report included: an extensive desk review; an in-depth policy analysis of research and publication policies as submitted by participating organizations; the quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from the documentation collected, including questionnaire responses and interview notes; the results of a global academic survey; and the triangulation and validation of the information acquired.

17. Officials with responsibilities for research production and uptake — where they existed — were interviewed: heads of research units, research focal points and regional research advisers; members of publications committees, editorial boards or steering committees; communication and public

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<sup>3</sup> The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) requested to be excluded from the review, while the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) did not respond to the questionnaire. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), UNITAR and the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) also did not respond to the questionnaire. However, an interview was conducted with the Director of UNSSC.

information officers; data scientists; research uptake specialists; chief librarians; and oversight and evaluation officers. In total, the Inspector and the team held 78 meetings and interviewed 215 people, either in person or by videoconference.

18. To fill the lacunae in the information submitted by participating organizations, the team developed its own inventory of key elements of policy research processes, including service owners, databases, learning resources and enabling knowledge networks, at the post-questionnaire/interview stage.

19. The Inspector also conducted interviews with senior managers of research and evidence-based policy departments from non-United Nations entities, including:

- (a) Intergovernmental organizations (the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the Executive Office of the President of the European Council, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission);
- (b) Governmental agencies (the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States Agency for International Development);
- (c) Interdependent think tanks and international research centres (the Migration Policy Institute Europe, the Institut de relations internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, the Global Partnership for Education, the Overseas Development Institute, the Club of Rome, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva).

20. To complement the standard practices of the JIU, the review team used ad hoc tools to capture, in a more comprehensive way, the intellectual contributions of professional researchers. To that end, the team designed and disseminated a survey to non-United Nations research and academic institutions and think tanks, hereinafter referred to as the “academic survey”. The academic survey contained 10 multiple-choice perception questions and a mini-questionnaire consisting of 3 open-ended questions on substantive issues. The World Association for Sustainable Development (WASD), the Academic Council on the United Nations (ACUNS), the International Studies Association, the Chairs Network of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) disseminated the questionnaire through their respective networks. The survey was taken by 492 respondents, 229 of whom responded to the open-ended questions. An analysis of the results is presented in chapter VIII.

21. In the same vein, the Inspector initiated a focus group discussion in London on United Nations policy research uptake, research-policy interface and collaboration between research communities and the United Nations system. The group included academics from Queen Mary University of London, the University of East London, the University of Oxford, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Utah State University, California State University San Marcos, Stockton University, the University of Suffolk, Coventry University, the Arab Urban Development Institute, Robert Gordon University, Oxford Brookes University, Mohammed V University at Agdal in Rabat, the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London and the London Centre of International Law Practice, mobilized by WASD - University of Sussex.

22. Comments on the draft report from participating organizations were sought and taken into account when finalizing the report. In accordance with article 11.2 of the statute of the JIU, the present report was finalized after consultation among the Inspectors in order to test its conclusions and recommendations against the collective wisdom of the Unit.

23. To facilitate the handling of the report and the implementation of its recommendations and the monitoring thereof, annex II contains a table identifying recommendations relevant to each organization, and specifies whether they are directed to governing bodies or executive heads.

24. The Inspector expresses appreciation to all who assisted in the preparation of the report, and particularly to those who participated in interviews, responded to questionnaires and so generously shared their knowledge and expertise for the purposes of this review. Special thanks go to the professors and political scientists whose genuine interest in the report allowed the JIU to learn and use the academic perspectives that enriched the report: Allam Ahmed, Stephen Browne, Patrick Nédellec and Thomas G. Weiss.

#### **D. Limitations**

25. The JIU has never conducted a review of the policy research function in the United Nations system, and could not find a comprehensive assessment of research policies and activities. In the absence of system-wide norms and guidelines, the team had to identify, examine and digest specialized literature on social sciences, and developed its own criteria and tools to systematize and organize the hodgepodge of fragmented information collected.

26. The mandates and concepts used in policy research vary considerably among the JIU participating organizations, let alone the autonomous protagonists that specialize in research and their networks. The unique corporate questionnaire could not serve the review. To overcome this difficulty, the Inspector had to design three customized questionnaires that were adapted to the three categories of respondents:

- (a) Organizations that have a research function as part of their constitutional and other normative mandates (such as the United Nations Secretariat, the International Trade Centre (ITC), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNICEF, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO));
- (b) Organizations that do not have a research function mandate but conduct policy research on a regular or ad hoc basis, as determined by their governing bodies and/or operational purposes (such as UNDP, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), IAEA and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO));
- (c) The United Nations University and its network of affiliated institutes, as well as specialized research and training institutes (such as UNRISD, UNICRI, UNSSC and UNITAR).

27. Notably, the above categorizations served mainly to the initial collection of information from participating organizations through questionnaires. The analysis of that information imposed different grouping of the organizations with respect to institutional mechanisms and policies for policy research uptake and quality assurance controls. The organizations whose relevant practices are illustrated in the narrative of the report belong mainly to category (a), with the notable exceptions of UNDP and UN-Women.

28. The overwhelming majority of participating organizations could not provide figures on the financial resources spent on research activities. The reason offered was that such activities were dispersed across various units and field presences, and their costs subsumed under the umbrellas of various projects, programmes and operational activities. As a result, the Inspector could not come to a clear conclusion on the overall financial and human resources used for research production and uptake.

## II. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND POLICIES FOR POLICY RESEARCH UPTAKE

### Defining the context for policy research

29. The demand for policy research across organizations in the United Nations system responds to various needs, differentiated by the nature of the respective mandates, the specific necessities related to programmes and projects, changes in strategies and adaptation to the dynamics of the operating environment. Policy research is called to support organizational objectives, among which are:

- (a) To assist the member States in their deliberations and advance their understanding on critical issues;
- (b) To understand and support the development of norms and standards in conventions, declarations, regulatory frameworks, agreements, guidelines and codes of practice;
- (c) To collect and analyse data in order to identify and monitor trends, patterns and emerging issues in an objective and trusted manner;
- (d) To understand barriers and opportunities and articulate evidence-based policymaking options, including, where imperative, ethical considerations;<sup>4</sup>
- (e) To generate evidence that can support field operations, shape priorities and inform and guide policy, programming and advocacy;
- (f) To make available relevant criteria for decision-making by means of differentiated tools.<sup>5</sup>

30. A comparative desk review of the bases of organizational norms for policy research showed notable diversity in the way the participating organizations comprehended and operationalized their core mandates/strategic priorities on research. Given the distinct differences among the organizations as to their mandates and the institutional configurations expected to produce, use and disseminate policy research, the analysis in the present report took into account the different nature, and consequently the different research capacities, of organizations under review, which, again, had to be grouped into distinct categories.

31. Diversity is natural, as it stems from specific needs in their particular contexts, with respect to the substance of the research. The Inspector found no compelling reasons to abstract conclusions or recommendations for a uniform approach to the production and uptake of research. Nevertheless, the analysis of the information acquired allowed some common denominators that may have bearing on the effectiveness and efficiency of policy research and its uptake with respect to three areas: the existence of corporate policies on research, the institutional configuration of research and the financial resources used for research.

#### A. Existence of corporate policies on research

32. The Inspector found that only one third of the organizations (37 per cent) had policy research processes determined by distinct policies (strategies, guidelines, circulars and equivalent administrative acts).<sup>6</sup> The scope of analysis was broadened to include any type of document which: (a) defined research outputs to be produced and reviewed under each organization; and (b) identified roles and responsibilities to guide the process.

33. The review of the research policies as defined by organizations<sup>7</sup> highlighted some recurring key elements: (a) relevance and usefulness; (b) priority-setting; (c) defining quality criteria; (d) the building

<sup>4</sup> See [www.who.int/ethics/topics/research/en/](http://www.who.int/ethics/topics/research/en/).

<sup>5</sup> ILO. See [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/ed\\_emp/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms\\_627315.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/ed_emp/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_627315.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> An indicative list is contained in annex I below.

<sup>7</sup> ECA, UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, DESA, UNCTAD and UNDP.



up of knowledge and synergies; (e) impact projection; (f) adherence to ethical standards; and (g) access to results.

**(a) Relevance and usefulness**

34. Relevance and usefulness are essential for efficient uptake. Policy research should be aligned to well-defined questions of relevance according to the strategic plan/vision of each organization and its mandate. It should promote realistic and actionable policy recommendations, further the organization's mandate, goals and objectives, and bring analytical clarity to issues of policy relevance.

**(b) Priority-setting**

35. A well-defined research agenda constitutes a road map for research activities. Prioritization depends on the institutional capacity and resources needed to carry out research. Proposed policy research should be assessed and prioritized against existing research and remain competitive in terms of quality, interest and importance. UNICEF, WHO, ECA, FAO and UNESCO, for instance, clearly request that research proposals demonstrate references and relationships with previous research conducted in those organizations. UNICEF has an internal global database for upcoming, ongoing and completed research programmes which staff can consult when drafting a research proposal.

36. Priority-setting should identify areas that have a greater likelihood of significant advances against available resources and capabilities and other pertinent factors, including the optimal ratio of research returns to dedicated resources.

37. In order to optimize returns from research conducted/commissioned by United Nations organizations, research initiatives should appropriately balance the outcome sought through innovation, and the risk of irrelevance or other kinds of failure. The research should be guided by independent and objective queries, not by risk aversion.

**(c) Defining quality criteria**

38. The validity and legitimacy of policy research most commonly relate to the selection of subjects, the measurement of outcomes and protection against bias. Methodological choices should be based on evidence that the research design and approach are fit for purpose, participatory and practice-oriented, peer-reviewed, cost-effective and likely to generate the intended outcomes.

39. UNICEF, for example, highlights as quality criteria: (a) the objectivity and impartiality of the process through which questions are framed, methodologies chosen and ways in which data are analysed, communicated and shared; (b) the adherence to academic standards in terms of referencing; and (c) the replicability and transparency of methods with outputs subject to peer review. The quality assurance practices that exist in the United Nations system will be examined in a separate section.

**(d) Building up of knowledge and synergies**

40. High-quality policy research cannot be conducted in intellectual isolation. It must build on and contribute to an existing body of research and analysis. The relationships and synergies of a research product with its predecessors should be explicit in the way the main research objective is formulated and linked to the assessment of the findings and their implications. Interviewees from research departments/units underlined that significant resources and efforts were invested in investigating similar themes without adequate effort to synthesize and translate existing bodies of knowledge.

**(e) Impact projection**

41. In addition to valorising existing knowledge, policy research products should thoroughly anticipate the impact of their findings. These may include recommendations and/or policy options that contribute to ongoing deliberations among member States, frame a problem or inform discussions on specific policy options. Recommendations should be actionable, logical, warranted by the findings and explained thoroughly with appropriate caveats.<sup>8</sup>

**(f) Ethical standards**

42. When research involves human beings, the methodology should ensure that ethical standards for researchers are being upheld. The principles of beneficence, justice and autonomy are critical for ethical assessment.<sup>9</sup> Ethical standards are considered in the design, planning and management of research and ensure that: (a) the risks to participants are mitigated; (b) the privacy of participants and the security of their data are fully respected through prior informed consent; and (c) there is disclosure of possible conflict of interest.<sup>10</sup>

**(g) Access to results**

43. The United Nations system treats research as a global public good, and a principle of open access should operate by default for research products and data published or commissioned by the United Nations. This includes publications, authorship and co-authorship in open access journals or collections (UNU, ECA, DESA and UNICEF offer notable examples). The Internet has helped facilitate the sharing and dissemination of data through remote analysis and open access initiatives. On sensitive topics, where issues of confidentiality are imperative, one third of the organizations under review have specific disclosure policies.

**Box 1****UNESCO Publications Guidelines**

The publications guidelines developed by UNESCO are set out in a comprehensive manner and include the description of procedures and responsibilities in all main phases of the research and publication cycle (planning and project definition, content preparation, production and distribution and evaluation and impact), with an overarching concern for promotion and visibility. Each phase contains a checklist of actions to be taken and the distribution of responsibilities, from the programme managers to the Committee on Communication and Public Information for final validation. The Guidelines are conceived as a manual and contain examples and documentation samples.

**The Inspector is of the opinion that the UNESCO Publications Guidelines can serve and be adapted to the needs of any other interested United Nations organizations.**

*Source:* UNESCO, Bureau of Public Information, UNESCO Publications Guidelines.

44. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance accountability, control and compliance.

<sup>8</sup> See Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans, *Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences: Methods that Matter* (Bristol, United Kingdom, Policy Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> WHO, *Standards and Operational Guidance for Ethics Review of Health-Related Research with Human Participants* (Geneva, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, “UNICEF policy on research”, executive directive (CF/EXD/2016-003), 19 April 2016.

**Recommendation 1**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations that do not have research guidelines and policies in place should consider establishing, as appropriate, a minimum set of standards on research production and uptake by the end of 2021.**

**B. Institutional configuration for policy research**

45. The institutional configuration for policy research among organizations in the United Nations system depends on an organization's mandate, scope of research (global, regional, national, subnational), strategic objectives (programmatic, normative, legislative, operational), dedicated financial resources (core resources/extrabudgetary, recurrent/occasional, etc.) and human resources (in-house/external, individual consultants/consultancy companies).

46. As a result, the institutional settings for research, even within the same organization, are not uniform, as it is assumed that roles and processes should be flexible to accommodate the subsequent needs of the respective department/unit/field office.

47. While there are no customized criteria to define clear-cut borders between various types of governance of research processes, for the purpose of the current review, three categories were identified, as set out below.

**(a) Organizations with a distinct research coordinating unit**

48. The common denominator of these organizations (UNICEF, ILO, UNODC, and DESA) is that they have designated units with a coordinating role for research and data collection and processing. The centrality of coordination is the main feature of this category.

49. UNICEF distinguishes itself with a comprehensive distribution of roles and functions. The main coordinating body for research in UNICEF is the Standing Committee on Data and Research. The Committee steers the development, review and updating of all corporate research and data strategies and holds the responsibility of identifying and prioritizing evidence collection and analysis. Programme divisions identify evidence gaps and act as focal points for global thematic research networks, while regional and country offices provide country- and region-specific research priorities.

50. The most notable feature of the UNICEF research governance architecture is a dedicated research centre, the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, which undertakes research on emerging issues, and tests and proposes alternative policies while retaining editorial independence. It exercises research leadership within UNICEF. The Office also supports and facilitates research through the development of procedures, guidance and standards.

51. Since 1960, ILO has conducted research through a central independent entity, the International Institute for Labour Studies. The Institute was recently transformed into the Research Department, mandated to generate knowledge through the coordination of research functions with and among technical departments. The Research Department, along with other substantive departments, is part of the Policy Portfolio reform headed by the Deputy Director General for Policy.

52. UNODC has a Research and Trend Analysis Branch, with research as its main responsibility, while other departments are involved when needed.<sup>11</sup> Notably, the Branch has overall responsibility for

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<sup>11</sup> Particularly in relation to national and regional research programmes carried out by its field offices.

defining research standards and ensuring quality and consistency for all UNODC research products by engaging broadly with field offices.

53. UN-Women has a Research and Data Section in its Policy Division, which monitors evidence and data gaps across the organization.

**(b) Organizations with separate technical/research departments bodies**

54. In this category (DESA,<sup>12</sup> the regional economic commissions, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, FAO), on the basis of corporate strategic directions, policy research is organized by different technical/thematic divisions. There is no central authority that imposes the research agenda. The initiatives and planning responsibilities are distributed according to the theme that defines the object of the research.

55. Nevertheless, there is a component of central coordination, which is exerted by publications committees. While the main responsibility for policy research design and direction rests with the Directors and other operational units, they must submit research plans/proposals to interdisciplinary publications committees for validation and clearance. The most common compositions of the publications committees include the executive heads (for example, the Executive Secretaries for regional commissions, or the Secretary-General for UNCTAD) and representatives from technical operational divisions and conference services. The publications committees have taken on the primary responsibility for quality assurance. Their role will be discussed in more detail in the section on quality assurance.

**(c) Organizations/departments with decentralized research priority-setting**

56. This category includes entities that have a strong field presence, where research has a predominantly local bearing on operational activities and direct practical applications. For example, OCHA, WFP, DPKO, UNDP, UNHCR and UN-Women invest substantial efforts in translating evidence into practice from/to programmes and projects at the field level. In addition to its field presence, UNHCR also has a core global (normative and research) mandate to provide guidance to Member States with regard to the application of relevant refugee legal instruments.

57. The Policy Branch of OCHA is the research repository within the United Nations Secretariat but the agenda of topics and priorities are proposed by the heads of humanitarian operations on the ground. The Policy Branch is divided into three units (the Intergovernmental Policy Section, the Policy Advice and Planning Section and the Policy Analysis and Innovation Section) aimed at promoting normative standards and addressing emerging challenges for evidence-based policies. The Inspector takes note of the above and highlights the clear linkages between evaluation and research.

58. In some organizations with decentralized functions, quality assurance for policy research and uptake is not consistent throughout the organization. The headquarters of an organization may not always be aware of research undertaken at the field level. Limited coordination between the former and the duty stations, and among technical and communication experts and operating units, can also pose risks for dissemination and uptake. For instance, interviewees in some organizations (UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF) drew attention to the fact that field-level research, which directly serves project/programme needs, may not have a distinct link to corporate agendas and results frameworks.

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<sup>12</sup> The Editorial Board of DESA also plays a leading role and coordinating function.

59. The patterns in institutional configurations for policy research vary within organizations at the headquarters level (among technical/thematic divisions), as well as between headquarters and the field level. Even at the field level there are inherent differences between various country programmes. In view of that diversity, the Inspector believes that the link between research and policy development is paramount for efficiency and impact, and calls for better communication and information flows.

60. **The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should take measures to ensure and strengthen the functional link between research on the one hand, and policy development on the other, within the organizations, at all levels, in order to facilitate research relevance and efficiency in decision-making.**

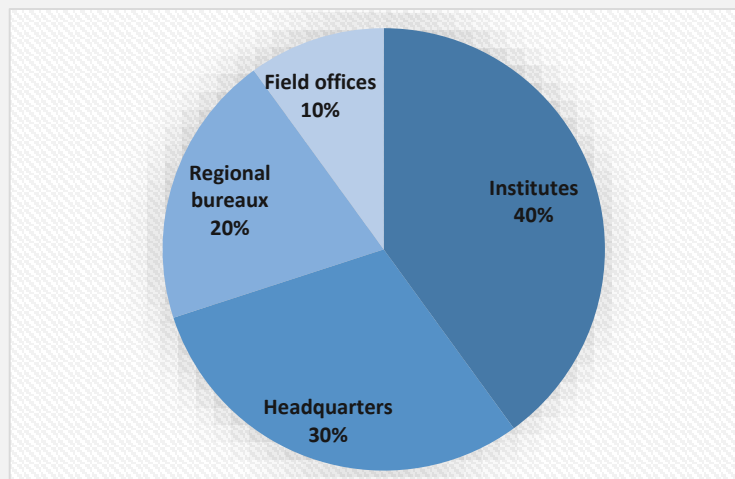
61. **The Executive Heads should also consider the use of internal databases as knowledge-sharing platforms for any ongoing and completed research in order to minimize duplication and enhance opportunities for dissemination and uptake. Steps should also be taken to ensure the regular update of existing databases for maximum use and efficiency.**

62. This categorization, as set out in paragraphs 47–59, as a prima facie mapping of existing practices, does not include institutional configurations difficult to classify or unique in type. One such example is UNESCO, where the major thematic vectors (education, science and culture), intersect in its pattern of research activities and specialized global academic networks, as well as in its regional and field offices.

**Box 2. Institutional configuration of UNESCO for research on education**

UNESCO has research functions structured across its thematic and founding disciplines that include specialized external “antennae” research organizations for each. In the sector of education, research is conducted by:

- (a) Sections at headquarters and field offices, particularly regional education bureaux;
- (b) Specialized institutes;
- (c) The independent Global Education Monitoring Report team hosted at headquarters;
- (d) Global UNESCO education networks;
- (e) UNESCO university Chairs;
- (f) Other affiliated institutes and centres.



63. The coherence of the UNESCO model is assured through the application of organizational standards, peer review mechanisms and disciplined interaction with universities and statistical authorities.

64. A unique research entity is the UNDP Human Development Report Office, which has a mandate to promote new ideas and practical policy changes and support national and regional analysis through research, data analysis, outreach and advocacy work. Despite its institutional profile as part of UNDP, the Office undertakes research and produces its global report in editorial academic independence.

### C. Financial resources for policy research

65. Most organizations (25 of 28) were unable to provide figures for expenditures on research or even estimates on the ratio of regular to extrabudgetary resources or internal to external resources dedicated to research. Several reasons accounted for such difficulties:

- (a) Organizations do not track expenditures on research separately with a distinct budget line. Policy research may be undertaken as part of a project/programme and budgeted accordingly. For example, a research product may be factored into staff time (internal or external) and therefore not budgeted as a research output;
- (b) Organizations that have a decentralized structure and a large presence on the ground have difficulties in collecting the relevant information at the headquarters level owing to impediments - real or perceived - in documenting and communicating costs;
- (c) With regard to external resources, differences in internal hiring administrative rules and hiring procedures for external consultants were noted as a key barrier to the computation of costs. Expenditures are registered in accordance with the nature of the service (advisory services, technical support, reports, etc.), not the output, therefore costs directly allocated to research are not documented appropriately.

66. **While the Inspector recognizes the above challenges and takes note of resources needed to monitor and document expenditures to that effect, he notes that in the absence of such data it is difficult to determine: (a) how senior management arrives at evidence-informed decisions on funding policy research; and (b) how a cost-benefit analysis on progress and uptake beyond the completion of an activity/project is performed at the organizational level.**

67. Lack of corporate financial data obstructs organizational understanding of research needs, thereby compromising corporate efforts to effectively develop skills and organizational learning. It may also risk duplication of work and increased costs for similar research undertaken across field offices, or even in different departments within the same organization.

68. Moreover, with respect to external expertise, in the absence of aggregate figures on research it is difficult to determine when and how external expertise is employed to respond to research gaps and improve core operations. For instance, a desk review of flagship publications produced within the United Nations Secretariat demonstrated that nearly half of the author entities used the services of an individual contractor. When regular United Nations personnel posts are allocated to the production of these publications, senior management should have a clear understanding of the rationale behind a decision to seek external expertise.

69. Lastly, lack of financial data on research poses risks to organizational learning efforts. It should be noted that most organizations under review did not have an internal mechanism in place to link recurring needs for external expertise to subsequent staff training and/or the integration of skills in high

demand into future job descriptions. If, for instance, the same type of external expertise was sought and utilized by an organization repeatedly over several years, it would be useful to know whether and how these needs could be addressed by improving the skills of internal staff.

70. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance transparency and accountability.

**Recommendation 2**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should establish, in the set-up of their programme budgets and finance (cost accounting) systems, a means to report on the cost of research activities by the end of 2020.**

71. As noted by one organization, there are also several direct and indirect/non-monetary/intangible costs for research activities. Such costs should also be mapped, tracked and monetized.

### III. RESEARCH PRODUCTION AND USE

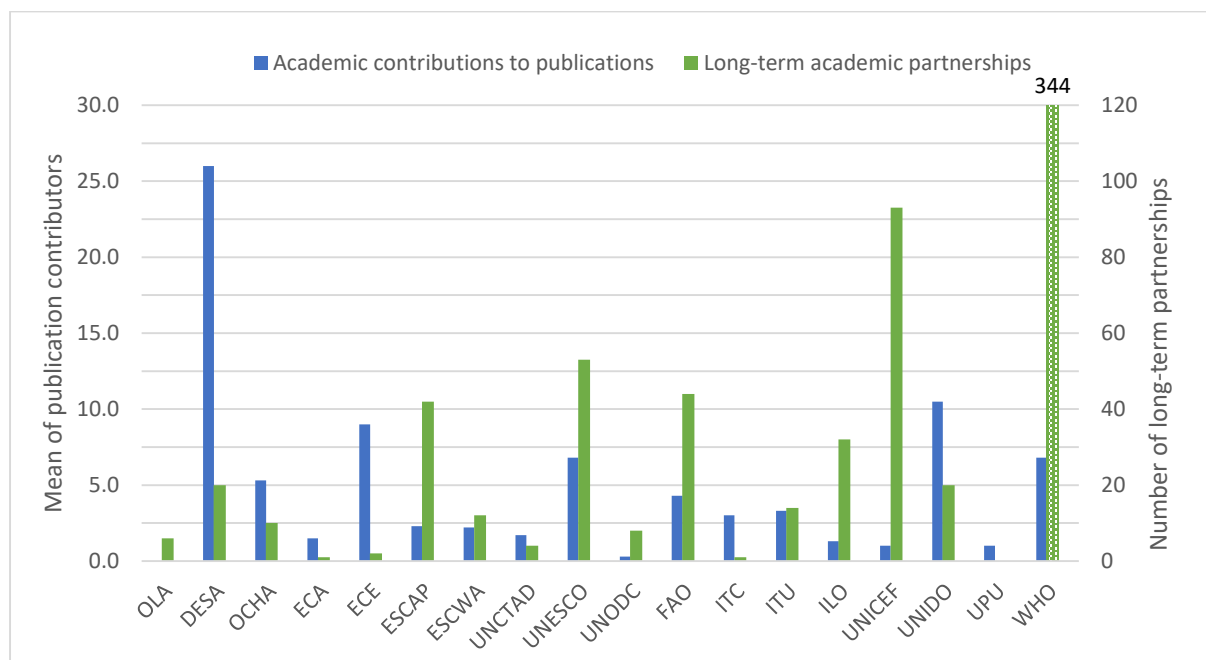
#### A. Producers of research

72. The complexity of the research landscape of organizations that have widely varying degrees of internal capacity is compounded by programmatic/operational requirements that also differ markedly. Even conceptually, some organizations assume explicitly to be knowledge-based and oriented towards capacity-building, while others define the essence of their functions in terms of the delivery of assistance.

73. As in the case of the attempt to aggregate estimates for financial resources allocated to research, almost all organizations participating in the review encountered difficulties in providing figures on staff dedicated to research, and whether they were internal staff or external consultants; in fact, they could not even provide approximate ratios. Research managers attributed such difficulties to: (a) different administrative rules and procedures for coding job titles and responsibilities; (b) financial rules and rigidities pertaining to United Nations staff contract modalities, which are deficient in terms of reporting research work as such; and (c) some partnerships with academic research institutions/centres, which make it difficult to ascertain concrete research outputs and staff time at the institutional level.

74. To generate better insight into the state of affairs and the evolution of external expertise utilized across organizations in the United Nations system, the review team analysed data from 33 entities in terms of: (a) the number of key/flagship publications on the Sustainable Development Goals – as highlighted in the responses to the questionnaire - that had been co-authored by academic/research institutions during the past three years; and (b) the number of long-term partnerships with academic/research institutions, as selected by the responding entities (see figure I). For the purposes of the current report, the JIU team applied an ad hoc method of codifying and scaling data specifically for organizations in categories (a) and (b), as grouped for the purposes of the current report (see para. 26).

Figure I: **External research intensity: collaboration with research centers/academic institutions for organizations with a core research mandate (category (a))**



Source: Responses to the JIU questionnaire.



75. As evidenced by the data summarized above, in general, the organizations in the United Nations system benefit considerably from external expertise, including from academic entities. For example, WHO has the highest number (344) of external partnerships with academic/research institutions, given its leading role in the production of guidelines and recommendations for clinical practice or public health policies.

76. Likewise, though agencies with substantial operational footprints, such as UNICEF and FAO, produce a substantial amount of research internally, they also rely heavily on external partners. DESA, ECE and ESCAP represent some of the largest differences between the two variables.

77. Differences are also noticeable among regional commissions, which have a core mandate on normative and research work. As inherently interdisciplinary structures, most regional commissions have developed in-house macro and sector research with analytical capacities and wide-ranging expert and multi-stakeholder networks. They can help in bringing to the fore the regional specificities and priorities. The Inspector is of the opinion that there is a need to further review these differences against resources and expenditures and identify where and whether improvements can be made, in particular in view of the role of the regional commissions as think tanks and providers of intellectual support for policy advice in service of the 2030 Agenda.

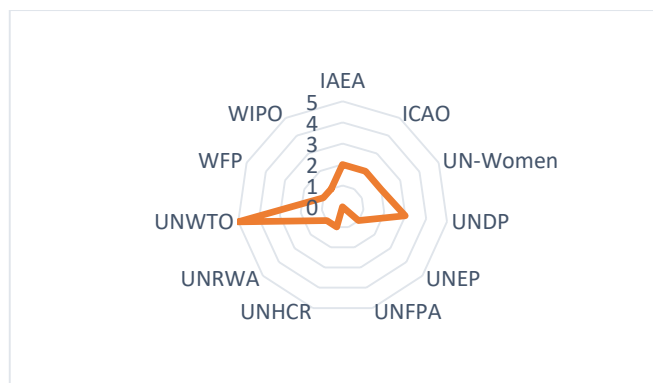
78. The implementation of the following recommendations is expected to enhance efficiency and collaboration.

### Recommendation 3

**The Economic and Social Council should request a comprehensive review of the research agenda of the regional commissions with respect to their research priorities, including partnering and resources allocated, in view of their role as think tanks in the context of the 2030 Agenda.**

79. With respect to 11 entities in category (b), the Inspector finds no compelling reasons or enough data to conduct comparisons and reach uniform conclusions on the use of external expertise by organizations in the United Nations system. The collected data demonstrate that organizations benefit significantly from external expertise. Nevertheless, in the absence of rigorous financial information and figures on human resources (internal vs. external, regular vs. extrabudgetary) dedicated to research, the actual picture of research producers, relevance and uptake remains difficult to assess (see figure II).

Figure II : Number of external partners (data normalized in scale) for 11 entities in category (b)



Source: Responses to the JIU questionnaire. Scale of 1-5 was applied for 0-25, 25-50 external partners, etc. No data were available for UNFPA.

80. For organizations in category (c) with a specialized research mandate (such as UNU and UNRISD), partnership with academic and research centres is the modus operandi for strengthening research capacity and producing systematic policy research to support decision-making. For instance, since its establishment UNU has forged partnerships with academic institutions and currently accounts for 13 research and training institutes located in 12 countries. UNU also benefits from long-term partnerships with more than 70 universities/academic institutions. The UNRISD collaborative research model, which includes partnerships with numerous universities, allows it to serve as a convening power in academia and policy work while also providing an autonomous space within the United Nations system for the conduct of policy-relevant research on social development.

81. Notably, for category (c), the Inspector recalls the determination of the Secretary-General of the United Nations “to assess the work programmes and results of the various research and training institutes of the United Nations for relevance and impact”.<sup>13</sup>

82. Beyond the specific limits of each organization and in view of the importance of costs related to external contributions to research, the Inspector is of the opinion that assessments should be carried out periodically, by all organizations with research functions, on the nature of the research needed and the options for the potential producers of such research (internal research staff, partnerships with academia, consultants) and the attribution of costs. Such analysis would enable the long-term improvement of internal research capacity-building, reduce the use of consultants and allow for better mapping and valorization of research produced by academia.

83. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of policy research outputs within organizations.

**Recommendation 4**

**The Executive Heads of United Nations system organizations should carry out periodic assessments of specific research needs and potential suppliers of research products and associated costs, with the long-term objective of strengthening internal capacities for research, as appropriate, and making systematic use of research produced by academia.**

84. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to control accountability and compliance.

**Recommendation 5**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations should extend his commitment to assess the work of research and training institutes and include the research work of other organizations, in the light of the system-wide findings and recommendations made in the present report.**

**B. Categories of research products**

85. The United Nations Policy Manual for Publications elaborated by the United Nations Secretariat<sup>14</sup> defines “United Nations publication” as any written material issued by or for the United Nations to a defined external audience under the authorization of the Publications Board in New York.<sup>15</sup> Publications are issued in response to legislative mandates or requests by intergovernmental bodies or

<sup>13</sup> See A/72/124 – E/2018/3. op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Manual for Publications (no symbol, no date).

<sup>15</sup> In accordance with its mandate outlined in ST/SGB/2012/2.

expert bodies, or when authoring departments (such as DESA, OCHA, UNCTAD, UNODC and the regional commissions) deem them necessary to fulfil their office’s work or mandate.

86. The Policy Manual for Publications and the United Nations Editorial Manual of the United Nations Secretariat distinguish the following forms of research products: major studies and reports (flagship publications), technical reports, statistical compilations, statistical databases, legal publications and normative materials, the United Nations treaty collection, handbooks, guidelines, manuals, toolkits, teaching materials, maps and atlases, proceedings, edited volumes, scholarly papers, serial publications (such as yearbooks and annual and biennial reports), periodicals (including journals, reviews, bulletins and magazines) and working papers.

87. The diverse thematic, operational and sectoral mandates of the organizations of the United Nations system have led to varied structures with regard to research outcomes. The review paid due attention to all forms of research outputs as enumerated by all participating organizations, but will comment on only two such categories: flagship publications and working papers.

#### **a. Flagship publications**

88. Many United Nations organizations put their own stamp on their flagship reports to disseminate the most relevant information about their work and their vision on the global issues under their mandates to the public at large. For many organizations, flagship publications represent the most comprehensive and representative research products. They are the main conceptual documents that communicate in-depth and analytical strategic thinking. Flagship publications are usually produced annually and report on global or regional statistics and analyses on a certain topic. They serve as the most reliable official source of data and information. The table below contains a selection of examples of annual flagship publications that meet these criteria.

Table 1: Annual flagship publications

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author organization</b>
<i>Human Development Report</i>	UNDP
<i>State of the World’s Children</i>	UNICEF
State of the World Population	UNFPA
<i>Science Report</i>	UNESCO
<i>World Investment Report</i>	UNCTAD
<i>Report on the World Social Situation</i>	DESA
<i>World Employment and Social Outlook</i>	ILO
<i>World Migration Report</i>	IOM
World Humanitarian Data and Trends	OCHA
<i>World Economic Situation and Prospects</i>	DESA, UNCTAD, ECA ECE, ESCAP, ESCWA, ECLAC
<i>State of Food and Agriculture</i>	FAO
<i>World Drug Report</i>	UNODC
<i>Trends in Telecommunication Reform</i>	ITU
<i>World Development Report</i>	World Bank Group
<i>World Economic Outlook</i>	IMF
<i>World Health Statistics</i>	WHO
Global AIDS Update	UNAIDS
<i>World Water Development Report</i>	UN-Water
<i>International Yearbook of Industrial Statistics</i> <sup>a</sup>	UNIDO
<i>SME Competitiveness Outlook</i>	ITC
<i>World Statistics Pocketbook</i>	United Nations Statistics Division

<sup>a</sup> UNIDO also publishes the *Industrial Development Report* every two years.

89. The Inspector noted that many of the organizations surveyed defined the term “flagship publication” rather loosely, and included many reports in that category which were not issue annually,

but were published less frequently or occasionally. The United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) is more selective in attributing the “flagship” definition to various publications issued by organizations in the United Nations system.<sup>16</sup>

### **b. Working papers**

90. Working papers are publications of preliminary results meant to stimulate discussion among intended audiences and critical comments on initial research findings. According to the Policy Manual for Publications, when the contents warrant publication but the audience is too limited to justify the cost of a full-fledged publication and/or funding is not available, the manuscript should be published as a working paper. The views and opinions expressed in working papers do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Secretariat and feedback is provided directly to the authors in order to develop and expand the prospective research paper. Working papers are often only digital, in the original language, and are uploaded on the authoring department’s website.<sup>17</sup>

91. Some organizations (ITC, DESA, UN-Women, UNIDO, the regional commissions) use background working papers as a foundation for flagship publications. At ITC, when working papers are produced internally, staff time should be dedicated and authors are encouraged to submit their papers to academic publications and promote their use as inputs to the policy documents of third parties.

92. The JIU desk review of the past two biennial/annual workplans of 22 of the 33 organizations surveyed demonstrated that research outputs were to a large extent (38 to 55 per cent) working papers, studies, discussion papers and thematic papers. Two points merit specific attention here. First, working papers do not pass through the same quality assurance process, as they are cleared and reviewed only internally at the division/department level and are often published only as digital products with limited follow-up action on impact or uptake. The accountability framework is consequently different from one product to another. Several organizations reported that progress in terms of quality assurance is needed on “minor” publications for which review can sometimes be overlooked. Second, even though working papers are meant to feed into flagship publications, their connections to those publications are often hard to determine, as the thematic focus of working papers is not always aligned with that of signature products. The time spent on the realization of these research products does not match the priority given to them at the organizational level.

### **c. Concluding remarks on research products**

93. The responses offered by participating organizations to the JIU questionnaire in terms of the main research outputs point to three main issues. First, despite the presence of classifications, for some research products there was little clarity and very often divergent opinions among staff of the same organization with regard to what fell under the category of policy research. Apparently, the United Nations Policy Manual for Publications is widely unknown as a source of reference, although the respective classifications are used.

94. During interviews, many organizations expressed difficulties in identifying key policy research products. For example, organizations with a strong emphasis on gathering statistical information would describe statistical annual series as policy research, as the series provides evidence-based information to Governments in order to better inform their decision-making. Other respondents argued that a policy

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<sup>16</sup> A list of flagship publications as compiled by CEB is available at [www.unsceb.org/flagship-publications](http://www.unsceb.org/flagship-publications).

<sup>17</sup> In the United Nations Manual for Publications, the term “working papers” is also used to identify full-fledged specialized publications for a very limited audience.

product should, at minimum, include some forward-looking, actionable policy recommendations for immediate “pick up” by the respective target audience.

95. While the Inspector acknowledges that the divergence of opinions corresponds to, and in some cases may satisfy, the specific research needs of organizations, the lack of horizontal clarity among staff may also reflect the absence of corporate guidance and agenda-setting in terms of policy research.

96. Second, a mixed taxonomic landscape compromises opportunities for policy uptake. Organizations do not have common definitions for research classification and have different ways of coding resources and job titles to research functions, and horizontal comparisons are therefore difficult to make. One organization observed that a common taxonomy would facilitate implementation of recommendation 2 in a harmonized manner at the system-wide level.

97. On the other hand, a common concern among officials interviewed was that, often, the taxonomy of research products used in their organizations was too rigid. Even though the classification might offer some general insights into which product should be developed for a specific purpose, operational realities across organizations blurred these distinctions. For instance, research emanating from working papers is not always categorized as research. UNICEF notes in this regard that the organizational taxonomy draws a line between “studies” and research which does not mirror activity in most business units.<sup>18</sup>

98. Third, an overarching issue is the immediate relevance and prioritization of research. Not all research is or should be policy-relevant. Organizations should provide staff with clear directions on distinguishing work that is “policy-adjacent” (done on a policy) from work that is “decision-relevant”, that is, done with the ex-ante purpose of informing a policy or practice decision and, therefore, with an explicit intention to be actionable. Intentionality is a key criterion in assessing whether a research piece is policy-relevant.<sup>19</sup> With intentionality comes awareness of the policy process and accountability. There should be a clear and tangible target group that intends to make use of the policy evidence generated.

99. Institutional clarity for policy research, while subject to evolution and subsequent methodological toolkits and built-in capacities for uptake, should be offered by research managers in the initial planning process. For example, ILO distinguishes between explanatory and descriptive research, a distinction that can inform the agenda-setting for the policy cycle, including for training. In a training course on research uptake, the UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti debates essential questions with the research staff, such as: “Does your research address a policy need, and how?”, “Have you, as a researcher, informed yourself about existing policies?”, “Does your research address the need?”, “What new information does your research offer?”.

100. Indeed, policy research should serve to inform policy debates, either by improving understanding of specific issues and alerting policymakers to emerging challenges and their repercussions or by influencing strategic thinking towards possible solutions. Decisions on policy research should be institutionally anchored rather than influenced only by opportunistic judgments made under the pressure of reporting and budget cycles.

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<sup>18</sup> UNICEF, *Strategic Review of Research Architecture: Supporting the Generation and Use of Knowledge* (forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> Stoker and Evans, *Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences*.

101. **The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should make sure that the specific contributions of policy research in decision-making are clearly enunciated at the organizational level, including with respect to the role and use of each distinct category of research product.**

### C. End users of research

102. Despite the diverse landscape of policy research among organizations in the United Nations system, the answers in response to the JIU's question on key target audiences tended towards designating the broadest spectrum of end users. Member States (including national Governments and policymakers at the regional, national and subnational levels), national authorities and associations, donors, academic researchers, think tanks, practitioners, other international organizations, civil society, the media and the private sector were all listed as key "consumers" of research produced by the United Nations system.

103. Even so, the majority of organizations encountered difficulties answering the JIU's question on adapting concept notes/research plans to target audiences. While they almost unanimously recognized the need for different methodological and dissemination practices for different categories of users and policymakers, they encountered difficulties in demonstrating how they would put such changes into practice. The divergence of opinions was also compounded by the fact that there was no horizontal clarity as to what constituted key policy products within an organization. For instance, most concept notes for key policy publications listed approximately four to six different target audiences. Admittedly, the research products may be of interest to several groups. However, focusing on the differences and characteristics of each segment could help organizations prioritize topics, refine their approaches and elicit the features that best meet the expectations of their audiences.

104. The Inspector identified such problems both at the initial design phase of the policy research cycle and at the end with regard to the communication of findings, which may affect uptake. Several interviewees from United Nations system organizations, for instance, considered the presence of policy recommendations to be sufficient for policy-relevant research, while others were of the opinion that interest from policymakers depended largely on the quality of the research product.

105. In the same vein, at the dissemination stage, the review team failed to identify - with the exception of five entities (UNDP, ECA, ESCAP, DESA and UNU) - surveys or any form of substantive feedback channel or follow-up on publications to measure policy uptake with their respective target audiences in the long term.<sup>20</sup> Surveys from the majority of organizations following an event (expert group meeting, launch of a report) did not adequately capture the findings of the publication, nor did they disaggregate the responses according to the target group. If organizations do not have a clear idea of the key stakeholders for each product, it becomes difficult to develop a comprehensive picture regarding that product's uptake. Accordingly, performance indicators were not always anchored to clearly defined benchmarks; instead, they seemed to reflect what organizations thought they could achieve on the basis of previous experience.

106. While the Inspector recognizes that long tradition in policy research and sustained interaction with target audiences in a specific area may justify a level of automaticity in interactions, a coherent road map of design, production, dissemination and uptake needs should be explicit and allow for direct links between research initiatives and results. **The Executive Heads of United Nations participating**

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<sup>20</sup> UNCTAD is mandated to conduct such surveys following the publication of its main research products, yet no data to that effect were provided to the review team.

**organizations should develop a tracking system to monitor research investments and link them to end users and results in order to document progress.** In the absence of the above, there is a risk that the true level of uptake will remain unrecorded.

107. Designing the appropriate dissemination strategies for different major target audiences, rather than just feeding research into the public sphere with the hope that policymakers will react in a certain way, was noted as a key concern among interviewees of organizations seeking to improve uptake. Indeed, such strategies may make a clear distinction between policy research products and research produced on the basis of academic rigour and settings only.<sup>21</sup> Dissemination strategies determine what the authors think they can accomplish with their research and how they will translate and promote those ideas in the most effective ways.<sup>22</sup>

### **Box 3**

#### **Speaking to different audiences – the Human Development Report Office**

UNDP has established a consultative process aimed at maximizing stakeholder engagement and soliciting input from different target audiences throughout the design and development phase of the *Human Development Report*. At the preparatory phase, external consultations are conducted to: (a) solicit stakeholders' perspectives and experiences; (b) define key messages; and (c) identify relevant experts to work on different aspects of the reports. The Human Development Report Office updates the Executive Board on the report and seeks feedback, including from eminent experts and statistical advisory panels, or even from statesmen, Nobel laureates and other eminent personalities.

#### **Dissemination strategy: disaggregated data for quality and uptake according to audience segment**

Since 2016, UNDP has been using a system to collect readership feedback on the quality and usability of research products. The system prompts the users who wish to download a knowledge product to share their email accounts for a follow-up survey related to the downloaded product. The results from the short survey provide insights on the reported usability of the products as well as categories of readers and the purpose/use of a research product. For instance, data provided to the JIU review team<sup>a</sup> indicated that 33 per cent of the readers originated in university and schools, and that the reason for downloading was academic (research, teaching or training) for 51 per cent of the users.

<sup>a</sup> Survey results provided by UNDP for 2017 on specific products.

108. Consequently, communicating research findings to other researchers/organizations or for policymakers requires a customized dissemination strategy. A clear understanding of the policymaking context in the specific country, the wider evidence base, other relevant policies and their results, the incentives and time frames and the levels of accountability between different government tiers for policy decisions is needed in order to consider ways to increase possibilities for uptake among policymakers.<sup>23</sup> ITC, for example, requests authors to develop and fill in a “promotion plan” template developed by its Communication and Events Department. For the preparation of its 2016 flagship report, UNRISD initiated a two-way relationship with academic institutions by establishing an open consultation process and abandoning the embargo stage to include views from third parties.

109. The table below illustrates a few key features for actions meant to influence communication strategies for different audiences. The table highlights the differences in purpose between academics and policymakers.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Selee, *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, “Research uptake: a guide for DFID-funded research programmes”.

Table 2

**Research and policy interface: communicating findings to researchers and policymakers<sup>a</sup>**

Criteria	Academia/scientists/researchers	Policymakers
Use of research findings	Enhance understanding on the topic	Arrive at a decision and make a value judgment
Professional priorities	Promote research in a specific area/discipline	Take informed decisions based on facts in a multidisciplinary and action-oriented way
Previous knowledge	Most likely robust	A wide range: from none to a good understanding
Behaviour towards findings	Scientific or professional interest to deepen research on the subject and discover new perspectives	React only if information is relevant to their responsibilities and has potential operational impact
Intended result	Advance knowledge and enhance evidence base of the topic	Be able not only to make an informed decision, but also communicate it effectively
Time frame	All time needed to cover the topic comprehensively	Often very short time spans and dependent on duration of mandates

<sup>a</sup> The classifications in the above table were inspired by the OECD-European Commission's Joint Research Centre course on translating research for policymakers and adapted following interviews with heads of research departments and communication/research uptake specialists. See OECD and European Commission's Joint Research Centre, "Skills for policymakers for evidence-informed policy making (EIPM)", available from [www.oecd.org/gov/evidence-informed-policy-making-agenda-2018.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/gov/evidence-informed-policy-making-agenda-2018.pdf).

110. Finally, the Inspector notes with interest the work of entities of a specialized legal nature who report to a specific intergovernmental committee or to the General Assembly. The Office of Legal Affairs, including the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, the International Trade Law Division and the Codification Division, falls under this category. Intergovernmental consideration of policy uptake on legal documentation is less challenging than in other fields, to the extent that it lends itself more readily to measurement and direct reference. The primary end users are States and specialized beneficiaries such as judges, contracting parties, legal practitioners, arbitrators and academics.



## IV. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND MONITORING

### A. Quality assurance and accountability: peer reviews

111. Quality assurance in research includes all the processes, systems, tools and resources that are deployed to provide assurance regarding the caution and control with which research has been conducted. The research guidance notes or policies on quality assurance of organizations of the United Nations system primarily refer to the responsibilities and division of labour of those involved in the production and dissemination of research, transparent research planning methodologies, staff skills and incentives to produce research and the handling and maintenance of samples, data and research records.

112. Most organizations use peer review mechanisms, either internal, external or a combination of both. Scientific advisory boards are also employed to solicit feedback and expert opinions on key flagship publications. The institutional configurations of internal peer review mechanisms vary and place the responsibility either at the specific department/divisional level or at the corporate level, through publications committees or peer review committees.

#### i. Organizations with a central publications committee or editorial board

113. Under this category, central responsibility rests with a publications committee or editorial board. DESA, for example, has an *internal peer-review system* in addition to requiring clearance through the hierarchy. This peer review system also applies to contributions from collaborators, such as science-policy briefs. The Department's research products also benefit from the quality assurance processes of its editorial board, and expert group meetings where publications findings are presented and discussed.

114. UNCTAD, UNAIDS, ESCWA, ESCAP, ECLAC, ECE and ECA also have central publications or editorial boards that clear research. For example, the ESCAP Editorial Board serves as a platform for planning, developing and disseminating research and publications. The Board is responsible for setting standards and guidelines to ensure the usefulness, timeliness and quality of the ESCAP publications programme. The Editorial Board is chaired by the Executive Secretary, while the Chief of the Strategic Communications and Advocacy Section serves as its Secretary. Public clearance at the central level in ECE involves only programmatic planning and monitoring, and the consideration of political sensitivities. Other considerations (quality assurance, consistency, relevance, agenda-setting, etc.) are addressed at the level of the authoring department. Ultimate editorial authority in ECLAC lies with the Publication Committee, chaired by the Deputy Executive Secretary, whose members are heads of divisions. The ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, currently being updated, includes quality assurance panels and procedures created for all major ECA knowledge products and services. The full functioning of panels and the application of procedures are reported to have resulted in a more systematic delivery of ECA products and services.

115. The ILO Governing Body periodically reviews the research agenda and adopted a Knowledge Strategy for 2018-21. ILO has a Research Review Group and a Publishing Committee, which provide quality control. The Research Review Group consists of independent experts from academia or other research contexts and is chaired by the Director-General. The Group is mandated to assure the quality, academic rigour and independence of the research undertaken by the Research Department. The Group also reviews ILO flagship reports. The Publishing Committee, which is chaired by the Deputy Director-General for Policy, further ensures the selection, creation, production and distribution of high-quality products that provide a sound basis for policy advice and advocacy. It develops and ensures the implementation of publishing policies and procedures.

116. The research and publications committees/boards of ITC have the coordinating role in production and dissemination strategies and have established a review process, notably for key publications, that includes internal and external peer reviewers.

117. In reviewing the role of publications committees, it should be noted that internal capacities, competencies and time constraints should be considered when examining opportunities to improve efficiency for the purposes of quality assurance and technical excellence. Too often, interviewees equated the presence of and clearance by executive management at publications committee meetings as the ultimate guarantee of quality. However, taking into account the broad and evolving spectrum of covered themes, along with the requisite capacities needed, an internal tracking mechanism should be put in place to solicit expert feedback according to the specific research product under review – and should not necessarily be confined to the senior management level. Furthermore, comments from members of the publications committees should be shared with concerned authors and addressed, as appropriate, prior to the meetings, to ensure process efficiency and allow for substantive discussions to take place during the meetings.

118. The issue of *external peer review* was also highlighted as critical to technical excellence by many officials of the United Nations system organizations, as well as representatives of external research centres and think tanks. While the majority of existing publication policies in the United Nations system (87 per cent) imply that publications must be subject to sound technical (including external) reviews, interviewees expressed concern regarding the level and quality of external reviews. In some cases, external reviews appeared to be solicited in an opportunistic manner among existing networks of authors whose work was not necessarily related to the subject.

119. With respect to quality assurance relating to the collection of data, numerous organizations have an additional layer of corroboration, as they seek external validation regarding the standards and use of data. For instance, DESA has a codified and standardized methodology for assessing and analysing data collected for its United Nations e-Government Survey, and for overall policy research activities. Similarly, ECA and UNCTAD require the submission of detailed plans to review the collection, processing and analysis of data for a publication/document. In the case of ECA, the plan is submitted and validated by the African Centre for Statistics in order to obtain accurate and reliable data in accordance with its Data Management Protocol. **The Inspector recommends that the Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations perform reviews of the functions of publications committees, or, where such committees do not exist, develop plans that set out accountability for quality assurance.**

## ii. Organizations with a multilayer process of internal review

120. Other organizations such as UNODC follow a sequence of steps for internal clearance. After the completion of each knowledge output by the relevant publication manager, each report is subject to internal review by the chief of the research branch, the director of the specific divisions and the directors of other divisions. If a publication is expected to have high visibility, that stage is followed by a review by senior management. Issues such as the maintenance of efficient data collection and knowledge management, and dissemination systems, are addressed as the research clearance process proceeds.

121. UNESCO, UNHCR, ICAO and UNDP also have comprehensive internal peer review processes. In the case of UNESCO, publications are first reviewed by an editor-in-chief, then by an internal review

committee (that includes experts from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics), followed by the peer reviewers and lastly by the Sector for External Relations and Cooperation.

122. The involvement of member States, prominent experts and research institutions from outside the United Nations system is also sought by some organizations in order to validate methodological choices and improve quality assurance. UN-Women uses external advisory boards for quality assurance on flagship publications. Members of these expert advisory groups work pro bono. Likewise, for the Formal Safety Assessment, IMO member States agreed on a structure and systematic methodology aimed at enhancing maritime safety, including the protection of life, health, the marine environment and property, by using risk analysis and cost-benefit assessment. UNODC seeks advice from scientific advisory committees composed of academic researchers on the content and review of its most visible publications.

123. External reviews may take the form of an advisory board or may be conducted through more informal consultations at different stages of the research process. UNICEF acknowledged the use of upward (international community and donors) and downward (beneficiaries) accountability to find missing links. **With a view to strengthening quality assurance processes, the Executive Heads are invited to consider, within the frameworks they deem appropriate, integrating an external peer review process as a mandatory step of the policy research cycle.**

124. For organizations such as UNDP, UN-Women, ILO and FAO, where research is highly decentralized at the country and regional levels, clearance and oversight is provided as appropriate by regional directors and country representatives. At ILO, for example, regional directors may establish, in close consultation with the Research Department, committees or other structures at the regional or subregional level to facilitate the implementation of research policies in their regions. At UNFPA, the research priorities and findings are also discussed with regional and country offices. At FAO, a new Policy Intelligence and Support Coordination Unit provides knowledge on agricultural development economics and on country- and region-specific issues.

125. The Inspector noted earlier in the report that the quality and oversight of research products were not uniform within individual organizations. In some cases, this lack of uniformity is necessary and fertile. In other cases, it may be problematic. Some organizations invoked the need for uniform quality assurance processes for all research products. Recent evaluations of UNICEF<sup>24</sup> and FAO<sup>25</sup> point in this direction and make a case for standards to be applied for all research products across the organizations, at both the field level and headquarters. Similarly, the process followed by UNDP also leaves clearance by the UNDP High-level Quality Assurance Committee at the discretion of the author. While robust quality checks exist throughout the clearance process, the author may or may not resort to the advice of the editorial board.

### iii. Organizations with a distinct and specific research mandate

126. UNRISD and UNU follow academically accepted processes for peer review and clearance. UNU peer review processes differ among its various institutes. In addition, a University-wide management system (Pelikan) allows directors to review performance expectations related to the management and delivery of academic projects. The administrators perform regular and randomized spot checks, while

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<sup>24</sup> Evaluations UNICEF (2018), *Strategic review of research architecture: supporting the generation and use of knowledge* (work in progress at the time of drafting).

<sup>25</sup> FAO (2015), *Evaluation of FAO's Contribution to Knowledge on Food and Agriculture* According to FAO, quality assurance standards were revised and improved following that evaluation.

the quality of research projects is regularly assessed through compulsory biannual reporting. Data produced through the Pelikan system are reported to the UNU Council.

127. UNRISD reports biennially to the Commission for Social Development. Advisory groups of multidisciplinary experts provide guidance on individual research projects, including flagship publications.

### **B. Evaluating and monitoring uptake**

128. The uptake of research is measured largely without reference to the discipline of the organization, department or author, and should take into account feedback from the intended end users of the research. The majority of organizations consulted (21 of 27 for which data was available to the JIU) collect data on the number of downloads and citations of key policy research outputs. In response to the JIU's question regarding monitoring indicators and feedback on publications, organizations indicated citations, downloads, conference presentations and panel discussions. For instance, statements such as "the recommendations were very well regarded by all participants [in the meeting]" were used to describe impact. In the view of the Inspector, such measurements are not relevant or reliable. In examining the monitoring and evaluation of uptake, the review team failed to identify any comprehensive follow-up process beyond the publication of the policy research product.

129. Monitoring and demonstrating uptake revolves around following the trail of research beyond citations and downloads and detecting policy actions that provide an evidence base to support claims of impact.<sup>26</sup> As policy research is increasingly requested to demonstrate uptake and impact, the number of specialized tools and models that offer useful means for monitoring relevance and usefulness for the public have increased.<sup>27</sup> Scientific research, since the establishment of the Science Citation Index in the 1960s, has usually been evaluated either by academic peer review or by the number of citations in peer-reviewed publications. In recent years, however, these tools have proven problematic for policy research, as they cannot adequately capture some of the broader and more complex aims of policy research, such as policy impact, changes in behaviour or the building of relationships, coalitions and networks.<sup>28</sup>

130. Consequently, the efficient monitoring and evaluation of policy research programmes need new approaches that go beyond the conventional methods of counting citations and downloads. Technometrics, sociometrics, pathway models such as network analysis, value mapping, expert reviews and user surveys represent means of capturing the relationships between research outcomes and policies, and assessing the uptake of research.<sup>29</sup> UNU, for example, uses process-tracing techniques (qualitative and quantitative) to follow up on and analyse how policy actors have encountered, engaged with, absorbed and acted upon some of its institutes' research products. The UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti is also exploring the use of alternative metrics and case studies to assess its impact.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy and Jane Tinkler, "Chapter 4: Modelling the determinants of social science impacts", in *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How Academics and Their Research Make a Difference* (London, Sage Publications, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen M. Quinlan, Mary Kane and William M. K. Trochim, "Evaluation of Large Research Initiatives: outcome, challenges and methodological considerations", *New Directions for Evaluations*, vol. 2008, No. 118 (Summer 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Ingie Hovland, "Making a difference: M and E of policy research", Working Paper, No. 281 (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2007). Available from [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2426.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2426.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> More information can be found at [www.unicef-irc.org/article/1668-innovative-research-impact-assessment-looks-at-drivers-of-violence-study-in-peru.html](http://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1668-innovative-research-impact-assessment-looks-at-drivers-of-violence-study-in-peru.html).

131. Outcome narratives can be also a promising tool in communicating uptake. Such narratives refer to the use of evidence packages which describe specific instances of research that led to successful outcomes. In this regard, useful information was identified by the review team on donor reporting documents/annual reports of United Nations entities that have a strong programmatic focus and where research findings are increasingly being used for programming and capacity-building efforts.

132. More broadly, the Inspector observes that organizations often have not successfully determined how to best utilize existing capacities to this end. The capacity and human resources needed to rethink the monitoring and evaluation of policy research within organizations should not always be sought externally. At different levels within organizations, officials dealing with research uptake play a role in either policy advice or communications, or in operations-oriented research areas. Staff exposed to both research and policy roles tend to have a better understanding of the dynamics of relevant policy research. When opportunities for synergies between research and programmatic/policy functions do not exist, executive heads should stimulate such opportunities either *internally* (through rotation within different roles), or *externally* (through secondment or sabbatical programmes), with the objective of improving research skills.

133. To that end, senior management should identify factors and issues that impede opportunities for integration among the research and implementing arms of the organization, and allow for synergies within and across different departments that have various responsibilities in research. Research uptake also implies incorporating research findings into the normative, operational and advocacy work of the organizations. The Inspector recalls that some JIU reports examined functions and practices addressing the use of evidence to support decision-making as part of the governance framework.<sup>31</sup> More recently, the JIU report on results-based management focused on the use of information on results for decision-making,<sup>32</sup> while a report on knowledge management made recommendations on the use of knowledge management indicators.<sup>33</sup>

**134. The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should give priority to internally available capacity for the monitoring of research frameworks, with a view to maximizing potential to improve uptake and reduce costs.**

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<sup>31</sup> JIU/REP/2014/6: Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system; JIU/REP/2016/5: Evaluation of the contribution of the UN development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection to support the achievement of the MDGs and other internationally-agreed goals.

<sup>32</sup> JIU/REP/2017/6: Results-based management in the United Nations development system. Analysis of progress and policy effectiveness.

<sup>33</sup> JIU/REP/2016/10: Knowledge management in the United Nations system.

## V. FACILITATING EFFICIENT RESEARCH UPTAKE

### A. Mainstreaming and integration

135. In the context of the United Nations system, research should be subjected to more rigorous safeguards to ensure relevance and efficient uptake. Research is based mainly on specific mandates and terms of references. Hypothetically, in a pure academic environment, a credible researcher is not necessarily keen to produce policy-relevant research. For the purposes of the United Nations, the search for relevance and uptake should be optimized. Similarly, a policymaker is not automatically qualified to effectively use and demand policy research. Unlike in the academic context, where collaboration and peer review may help guarantee the quality of research outcomes, in the operational context of the United Nations the peer review is not enough. The relation between the research producers and the users is asymmetrical. The internal capacity for uptake should include the ability to translate the research findings into managerial language and tools.

136. Consequently, even when they do exist, guidelines and policies on the cycle of production, quality assurance and the dissemination of research are necessary but not sufficient. Research processes should be integrated into the strategic needs of the organization. Research activities should be accompanied, throughout the entire process, by vision and actions for research uptake and communication strategy, to make sure that findings are read and validated by a broader audience and produce an impact.

137. The Inspector notes that research uptake is often considered to be implicit, and there is no need for specific efforts to develop internal baselines aimed at actively engaging intended stakeholders, strengthening enabling factors and building capacities for uptake. When they referred to policy research uptake, 21 of the 33 entities questioned indicated launching events (expert-group meetings, intergovernmental conferences, etc.). As a result, the opportunities for communication after the research is published are often limited to actions that do not allow for interaction among participants and the feedback necessary to assess the use of the publication.

138. To remedy such flaws, **the Inspector believes that uptake actions, and related planning and costs, should be included in the research projects, and be integrated at an earlier stage, namely during the design of research activities.**

139. The desk review of various research agendas, publications, policies and communication strategies shows that the terms “communication”, “dissemination” and “uptake” are being used interchangeably, without clarification and/or guidance with regard to the requisite steps, baselines and value for each. Sometimes even interviewees from research and policy departments were not aware of whether or not the organization had such guidance in place. A majority of officials interviewed were of the opinion that research uptake responsibilities should be solely confined within communication/partnership departments. It is thus often left to departments that have no prior knowledge, expertise or interaction with the intended audience in the respective topics to disseminate research findings to potential users. Only one organization (UNICEF) had a professional staff dedicated to supporting and building capacities for research uptake.

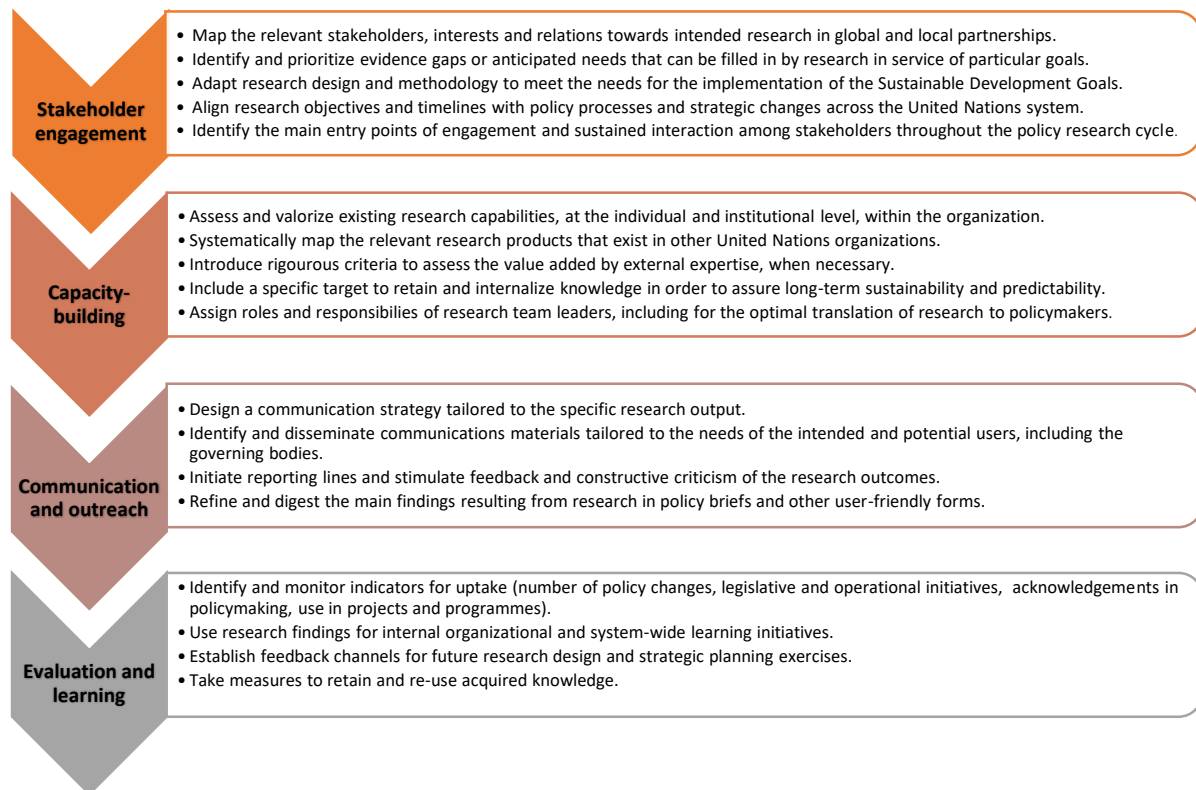
140. While acknowledging that institutional configuration, time and resource constraints may lead organizations to such practices, **the Inspector believes that organizations could do more to create and consolidate links between researchers and the users of research findings.** For example,

UNRISD sets out its research for social change within a framework intended to link “research, communications, policy engagement, results and impact”.<sup>34</sup>

141. Another observation is that baselines and monitoring indicators on uptake are rarely defined from the outset. The Inspector believes that without an effective research uptake policy and monitoring indicators, the actual uptake will remain difficult to determine and improve. While there may be some level of automatism of uptake in the dissemination of publications, proactive measures can strengthen uptake.

143. It is beyond the scope of this review to propose a uniform approach for policy research uptake. However, a desk review and key interviews with research departments in the United Nations system, as well as with research specialists from academic institutions and think tanks, allowed the same driving factors to emerge.<sup>35</sup> The review presents the factors below with a view to informing the considerations of United Nations organizations to that effect, rather than prescribing a benchmarking framework applicable at a system-wide level. The following figure is a sequence adapted to the Sustainable Development Goals research needs in general, and to specific goals in particular.

Figure III: Sequence adapted to the research needs of the Sustainable Development Goals



144. **Stakeholder engagement.** In envisaging policy influence, researchers should be asked to demonstrate a robust understanding of policymaking priorities and the actors and interests represented, as well as the structures and frameworks in place regarding the ways in which research questions can respond to these concerns.

<sup>34</sup> UNRISD, “Research for social change: transformations to equity and sustainability — UNRISD strategy 2016–2020”, November 2015.

<sup>35</sup> In particular, see Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, “Research uptake”; Overseas Development Institute, “Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact toolkit”, March 2018.

145. Engaging with the appropriate stakeholders from the outset creates sustained relationships, an exchange of ideas and increased opportunities for potential “policy windows” to ascertain how decision-makers may be interested in using research findings. The types of stakeholders will most likely vary according to the focus of the research products. Therefore, for each type of stakeholder, authors should consider the most appropriate messages and activities, budgets and timelines to ensure that they remain engaged throughout the policy research cycle.<sup>36</sup> This implies the need to identify the target audiences and their roles starting with the design phase.

146. The availability of information during the critical time when decisions are made regarding the next year’s budgets can provide fertile ground for a receptive audience looking for policy and programme solutions.<sup>37</sup> Engagement can be both formal, through the established channels of intergovernmental meetings and consultations, conferences and expert group meetings, and informal, through academic and scientific networks. The Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the European Union and the World Bank acknowledged the need to incentivize and encourage staff to maintain both academic exposure and networks to advance research excellence; such a proactive approach was not met at the United Nations at the system-wide level.

147. **Capacity-building.** It is essential that policymakers and research staff have the capacity to use, interpret and apply evidence in policymaking. Investing human and financial resources in policy research should gradually enhance internal capacity and reduce dependence on costly consultants. For example, in 2016 the UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti introduced a training course on research management and methods, which was delivered to over 500 staff in key research-related roles throughout the organization and adapted to regional contexts across UNICEF regional centres and country offices. The Inspector is of the view that training courses dedicated to specialized research staff are a necessary good practice, and encourages the Executive Director of UNICEF to document the experience acquired in carrying out this initiative and share it with other interested United Nations organizations. **However, improving internal capacity for research and its dissemination also implies reviewing hiring procedures and job profiles.**

148. The Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, in cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, also delivers specialized training to enhance the capacity of policymakers to conduct evidence-informed policymaking. The resulting skills framework offered by the training provides senior government officials with the opportunity to better comprehend and appraise evidence and nurtures a supportive institutional setting within their organizations.<sup>38</sup>

149. **Communication and outreach.** As the United Nations is a provider of research as a global public good, the end users can be Governments, non-governmental organizations, academics and the public at large. To reach such a broad audience, the adequate translation of policy research into the language of users and managers at the internal level of participating organizations is not sufficient. Policy research findings should be timely, expressed in clear language and make direct connections to known concerns.

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<sup>36</sup> ILO, *Guide on Measuring Decent Jobs for Youth: Monitoring Evaluation and Learning in Labour Market Programmes — Note 7: Evidence Uptake in Policy Formulation* (Geneva, 2018). Available from [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms\\_627315.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_627315.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> OECD, (2018), <http://www.oecd.org/gov/skills-for-policymakers-for-evidence-informed-policy-making-2018.htm>



150. The users of policy research are the ultimate judges of whether the evidence produced support claims of impact. Research departments must be encouraged to publish their findings in forms that are accessible to non-experts, including policy briefs, fact sheets, summaries or even weblogs or e-discussions. For instance, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of DESA often engages prominent experts or policymakers to write weblogs in order to stimulate interest and discussions regarding key issues of a publication.

151. The design of communication strategies should clearly identify target audiences, define roles and responsibilities, include plans of action and dedicate resources accordingly, and should be an integral part of a research project's design.

152. **Evaluation and learning.** The assessment of research findings should include early and regular process evaluations in order to provide adequate and timely information regarding uptake. As noted previously, the evaluation should not stop at the launching of a research product, and the indicators should not be limited to the number of attendees. It is the assessment of long-term impacts that provides information about the sustainability of research findings. Only a few interviewees confirmed that they systematically gathered feedback from users with regard to the impact of the uptake of their research findings. Thus, the results and impact possibly attributed to United Nations knowledge products are only occasionally recorded at the organizational level. This represents a missed opportunity for organizations to take stock of the impact of their knowledge products, and to maximize the value of institutional knowledge for future research planning.

153. To assess the uptake and sustainability of policy findings, changes not only in research but also in policy, programmes and practices should be measured, and a minimum set of indicators is needed to illustrate interactive relationships between research and knowledge users. The Inspector takes note of the comprehensive guidelines of WHO<sup>39</sup> to this end, which include indicators that encompass the individual, organizational, institutional, national and regional research systems and require narrative summaries, indicators and means of verification.

154. The entire United Nations system can benefit from the body of experience built by the research uptake planning carried out by different organizations, in their specific contexts, for learning and performance management purposes, particularly in view of the holistic nature of the 2030 Agenda.

155. **The Executive Heads of the United Nations organizations should ensure a systematic approach towards tracking and documenting progress on research uptake at the system-wide level and determine feedback channels within organizations.**

## **B. Open access to research outcomes in the context of the 2030 Agenda**

### **I. The benefits of open access**

156. The issue of more open access has acquired prominence in the quest to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Improving access to and re-use of United Nations research is an important prerequisite towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Facilitating access to research is an element to be considered at all stages of the research process and includes making data accessible to other teams, to departments/divisions sharing information cross-departmentally and to organizations that make knowledge products freely available to the public. Open access can enhance and accelerate the entire policy research cycle by improving the speed, efficiency and efficacy of research as work is published,

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<sup>39</sup> “Module 2: developing an implementation research proposal” and “Module 5: disseminating research findings”, in WHO, *Implementation Research Toolkit: Workbook* (Geneva, 2014).

read, cited and then built upon by other researchers, institutions, practitioners and policymakers. **The Inspector recommends the UNESCO *Policy Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Open Access* as a comprehensive and practical handbook on open access.**

157. The critical importance of open access for research uptake has been identified by the JIU's analysis of the publication policies/practices of its participating organizations against their strategic plans, and validated by several key interviewees. Notably, one of the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Board to the Secretary-General was that scientific findings must be readily available and accessible, as the validity of results is built upon rigour and reproducibility.<sup>40</sup> The views were collected in such a way as to allow the review team to highlight the following benefits attributable to open access research products:

- (a) **Enhanced interdisciplinary research.** This allows users to locate and use literature and data from different disciplines; it inspires new questions and knowledge contexts. Different approaches and research backgrounds, through cross-fertilization, may lead to new issues and solutions and can also help reduce bias in analytics and experimental design. The Inspector notes that ECLAC has developed a series of observatories to track economic and social trends;
- (b) **Minimized risks of duplication in research efforts.** Research redundancy was underlined as a key problem by both the academic community and organizations in the United Nations system. As one highly placed interviewee noted, there is often resistance in sharing data, information and knowledge among divisions within the same organization. This leads to increased costs resulting from staff working on similar and in some cases identical research questions. Instead, research and easy access to data allows researchers to iterate and build upon existing knowledge and thus accelerate discovery in new directions;
- (c) **A positive impact on the visibility of research products.** Broader outreach increases the chances of usage,<sup>41</sup> as articles in repositories or open access journals can be found effortlessly. Statistics on repository usage in turn illustrate the level of interest and readership and simultaneously serve as indicators of impact. For example, the World Bank, consulted for the purposes of the present review, identified, through statistics on repository access, that data repositories were accessed more often than policy briefs, and that policy briefs were accessed more often than longer publications. By disaggregating data on location, an impact evaluation team was able to identify that data were predominantly accessed by students of universities in the North. As a result, the organization revised their communications strategy with a view to intensifying outreach efforts in the global South. The revision also included shorter versions of lengthy publications for the convenience of their readership from non-academic audiences;
- (d) **Maximized use of advances in digital technologies.** Text mining and data mining technologies can optimize the multiple use of relevant research outcomes. These tools extract information across disparate fields of research and create new knowledge. Seizing such opportunities is hindered if researchers and practitioners cannot access most of the relevant literature.<sup>42</sup>

158. An example of good practice is offered by the “UNU Collections”, which holds records of research articles produced by the UNU network of institutes.<sup>43</sup> In 2018, ITC, UNCTAD and the World Trade Organization launched the Global Trade Helpdesk initiative, whereby the three organizations

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<sup>40</sup> UNESCO, *The Future of Scientific Advice to the United Nations: A Summary Report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations from the Scientific Advisory Board* (Paris, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> UNESCO (2012), *Policy Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Open Access*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://collections.unu.edu> (5,772 records as at 28 November 2018).

make trade information more transparent and accessible through an integrated web portal. The collaboration is part of a broader coalition of organizations, and includes data from UNIDO, FAO, the World Customs Organization, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the African Development Bank. UNDP leads in data openness through its International Aid Transparency Initiative and global delivery initiatives. ECLAC reported that it had created alternatives to mainstream methodologies in order to offer a wider range of options to its member States.

159. Despite the existence of good practices and numerous forms of interaction, the Inspector observed that more initiatives are still needed, as limited access to intra- or inter-organizational findings obstructs follow-up on innovations and results in increased and/or duplicate costs of publicly funded research.

160. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance coordination, coherence and harmonization.

**Recommendation 6**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should consider calling on the Executive Heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so to establish a system-wide policy on open data access, supporting software and research-sharing among the United Nations system organizations.**

161. The policies should include, inter alia, provisions that clearly determine re-use rights to publications and data. They should also include deposit options, hosting options and links with research centres, in the case of external providers.

**II. Stimulating ownership and broadening research uptake in the global South**

162. The issue of easy access to knowledge is of high relevance to the spirit and letter of the 2030 Agenda, which emphasizes the ownership of Governments. **Increased access to and reproducibility of data is critical for advancing the societal engagement and levelling the playing field of researchers, practitioners and policymakers from the South.**<sup>44</sup> Interviewees underlined the value and urgency seen in intensifying efforts for effective partnerships with research centres in the South.

163. This finding is also supported by the data collected for the present review, as currently United Nations research is disproportionately produced, accessed and used by universities and research centres in the North. The evidence suggests that 81 per cent of external research centres and academic institutions contributing to flagship publications are from the North (see figure IV) and so are 65 per cent of long-term corporate partnerships on research (see figure V). As a research manager noted, “Instead of building capacities and working with researchers and institutions from the South to support them [to] devise solutions to their own challenges...the United Nations Research Architecture overly relies on well-established partnerships in the North”.

164. Last, but not less relevant, open access can also mitigate the challenges and limitations facing the research entities of the South when they are not able to meet the increased costs of journal subscriptions and publisher licensing restrictions, which are often quoted as an impediment to innovation.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan P. Tennant and others, “The academic, economic and societal impacts of Open Access: an evidence-based review”, *F1000 Research*, vol. 5 (2016).

Figure IV  
Non-United Nations contributors to publications in 18 United Nations entities with a core research mandate

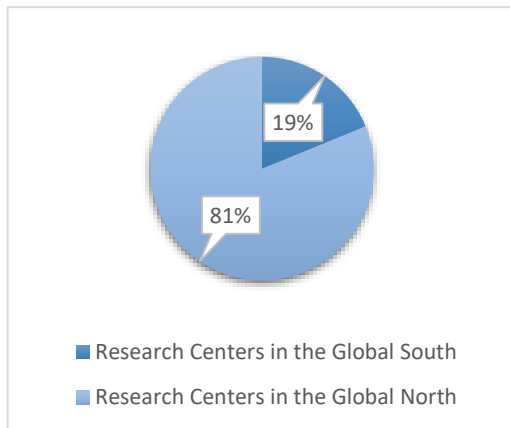
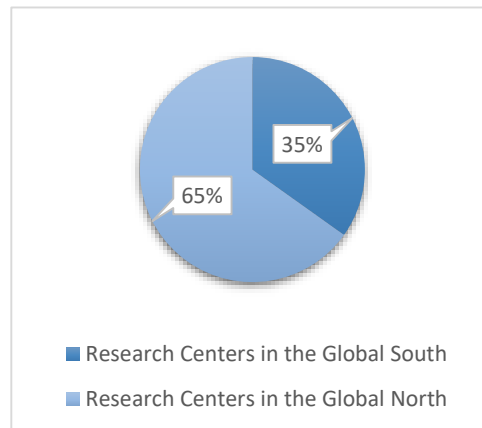


Figure V  
Non-United Nations long-term institutional research partners in 34 United Nations entities



165. The Inspector takes note of the efforts of UNU, UNDP, UNRISD, DESA and ECA to solicit scientific knowledge from researchers of the South through calls for scientific papers. He commends the project entitled "Statistics as a Public Good" of the Statistics Division of the United Nations, whose objectives are to provide free access to global statistics, educate users about the importance of statistics for evidence-based policymaking and decision-making and assist national statistical offices in strengthening their data collection and dissemination capabilities.<sup>45</sup> He also commends ITC for the attempt to systematically involve researchers from the South when building national datasets for its *SME Competitiveness Outlook* publication.

166. However, the idea of organizations in the United Nations systems enhancing their partnerships with Southern institutes has been discussed more than it has been acted on. Capacity-building for policy research uptake with the South has not been approached in a structured way and the review failed to identify a comprehensive analysis of existing capacities and the subsequent identification of geographical and thematic research priorities. In the view of the Inspector, a transformative research agenda for sustainable development would demand more focused objectives and a more deliberate targeting of capacity-building. In view of the prevailing role of Governments in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the need to broaden the geographical scope of research partnerships is imperative.

167. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance the relevance and impact of research.

#### **Recommendation 7**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Executive Heads of other United Nations system organizations should review the level of involvement of researchers from the South and adopt policies and frameworks that will stimulate capacity-building for all dimensions of the policy research functions, including research uptake at the national level, and report thereon to the General Assembly and to the governing bodies, respectively, by the end of 2020.**

<sup>45</sup> United Nations Statistics Division, <http://data.un.org/Host.aspx?Content=About>.

## VI. LINKING RESEARCH TO THE 2030 AGENDA: MIGRATION AS A CASE STUDY

### A. Introduction

#### Why migration?

168. During the review, the Inspector found numerous examples of the use of research outcomes for decision-making and action on the Sustainable Development Goals. As the thematic spectrum of research outputs linked with the Goals is so diverse, a single topic - migration - was chosen as a thematic lens to illustrate the multidisciplinary scope of the policy research function within the broader 2030 Agenda framework.

169. The relevance of this choice was confirmed by robust academic studies. According to an analysis of the changing context for development since the foundation of the United Nations, one of the five key drivers of change was migration (and mobility).<sup>46</sup> Other authors argued that, in the absence of a global migration regime, international organizations could contribute to the convergence of migration governance in various regions of the world.<sup>47</sup> Yet, despite the importance of the issue, observers coincided in noting that there was a lack of systematic studies on the role of international organizations and that gaps persisted in the current knowledge pool, leading to less reliable support for political decision-making on migration. The 2016 round table on strengthening United Nations research uptake, also highlighted the thematic area of migration, among others, as a topic that presented critical gaps in terms of research needs.

170. The report of the United Nations System Task Team on the Post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda, entitled “Realizing the future we want for all”,<sup>48</sup> recognized migration as one of the core enablers of development. This report led to the inclusion of migration in target 10.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which requires the facilitation of “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”.

171. Given its cross-cutting nature, migration is also closely related to several other Sustainable Development Goal targets, such as the development and retention of the health workforce in developing countries (target 3.c), the elimination of the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women (target 5.2), the eradication of forced labour and slavery (target 8.7), the promotion of safe and secure environments for all workers (target 8.8) and the reduction of transaction costs for migrant remittances (target 10.c). This implies that data collection and analysis should be carried out by more organizations, that is, through inter-agency collaboration.

172. The review also examined migration as a case study on the process of producing, utilizing, disseminating and sharing migration-related data and research. As migration is a global, multifaceted and multilayered issue, relevant conclusions could be useful, through projection and deconstruction, to inform research needed for other complex topics.

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<sup>46</sup> The other four are political economy, security, the physical environment and science and technology. See Richard O’Brien, “Drivers of change for the UN’s future role”, in Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *Post-2015 UN Development: Making Change Happen?* (Abingdon, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Oleg Korneev, “International organizations as global migration governors: the World Bank in Central Asia”, *Global Governance*, vol. 23, No. 3 (July–September 2017).

<sup>48</sup> A/RES/66/288 - *The Future We Want*, para 88 (d).

## Methodology

173. A number of United Nations entities that categorized themselves as organizations that undertook research on or whose work related to migration were required to respond to a specially designed JIU questionnaire. Fourteen entities<sup>49</sup> responded to the questionnaire, including IOM, which voluntarily offered a comprehensive and useful response despite the fact that it is not a participating organization of the JIU.

174. The questionnaire aimed to identify the relevance of migration as a topic on the specific research agendas of the respective organizations. The questions also sought to identify the motivation and reasons behind doing or using research on migration, the thematic focus under which research on migration is conducted, the organizations' main relevant research products and the existing forms of inter-agency cooperation with regard to the production and use of research outcomes, including the availability of system-wide repositories on migration.

### B. Contextualization of research uptake

175. The theory and practice of research do not offer universally accepted definitions or quality standards in a normative form. The existing practices have to be contextualized. Two main features of policy research have been used as criteria for such contextualization: the (objective) interdisciplinary nature of the area and the (subjective) imperative for inter-agency cooperation in research. It is worth noting the Inspector's assumption that such criteria might be applicable to other areas of interest in the 2030 Agenda.<sup>50</sup>

176. For the particular context of the current review, and for the synthesis of the information collected through the questionnaire on migration, the two criteria have been contextualized as follows:

- (a) Interdisciplinary research, which implies that migration touches not only on the thematic mandate of some agencies, such as IOM, but also impinges on the multifaceted concerns and activities of other United Nations organizations;
- (b) Collaborative research, which implies co-design, co-production and co-use, or at least a systematic and institutionalized process of consultation among agencies.

#### *Interdisciplinary research*

177. The information collected from the 14 entities confirms the assumption that migration is interlinked with, and has an impact on, other areas of concern across the United Nations system. The Inspector chose to organize the thematic areas related to migration into six clusters:

- (a) Economic: research on issues such as human mobility and development, the impact of direct investments and remittances from diasporas, labour migration, entrepreneurship, migrations

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<sup>49</sup> UNCTAD, UNDP, UNHCR, UN-Women, WFP, FAO, ILO and UNESCO from among the participating organizations of the Joint Inspection Unit); DESA and OCHA as part of the United Nations Secretariat; two regional economic commissions, ESCAP and ESCWA; UNRISD and the United Nations as autonomous research entities; and IOM.

<sup>50</sup> The methodology used for the analysis of the case study was a creative adaptation of the academic concept of interdisciplinary collaborative approach, which was disaggregated to fit the nature of the current review and focused on policy research in the United Nations system as distinct from purely academic research. The original model is described in Kery Facer and Kate Pahl, eds., *Valuing Interdisciplinary Collaborative Research: Beyond Impact* (Bristol, United Kingdom, Policy Press, 2017).

and structural transformation and the impact of migration on rural and agricultural livelihoods has been undertaken by UNDP, UN-Women, ILO, UNHCR, DESA, UNCTAD, OCHA, ESCWA, FAO, UNU and IOM;

- (b) Social: decent work, employment, rural-urban interconnections, food security, migration and youth, migration and health, labour absorption capacity, the misrepresentation of migrants in society and other social dimensions have been the subject of research by ILO, UN-Women, WFP, DESA, OCHA, UNESCO, ESCWA, FAO, UNDP, UNRISD, UNU and IOM;
- (c) Environmental: the impact of climate change and natural disasters on migration have been studied by UNDP, OCHA, WFP, FAO, UNU and IOM;
- (d) Human rights: research on the consequences of migration on human rights has been undertaken by UN-Women, UNHCR, UNDP, UNRISD, UNU and IOM, with specific emphasis on human trafficking and violence against women;
- (e) Peace and security: the relation between conflicts and protracted crises of migration was included in the research agendas of WFP, UNDP, FAO, OCHA, UNU and IOM;
- (f) Governance: studies and reports on migration governance, migration law and policies, legal protection, irregular migration and gender-responsive migration governance were produced by UNDP, UN-Women, ILO, DESA, ESCWA, UNRISD, UNU, ILO and IOM.

178. The thematic landscape of the research on migration as outlined above is far from being exhaustive. Nevertheless, it represents a sample of what the responding entities considered to be more representative and topical, and it allows for a few conclusions:

- (a) Migration, like other global challenges, is a complex phenomenon, and understanding it depends on research done within the areas of expertise of several organizations in the United Nations system, under different perspectives and with different purposes. This may lead to a divergence in direction or a duplication of efforts if research is done in isolation, without a conscientious system-wide contextualization;
- (b) The areas of common interest, such as migration and development, climate change and migration and the human rights of migrants, could be better served by the co-design, co-production and common use of research, which would serve to enhance coherence, authority and efficiency in the use of resources. This may warrant the alignment of directions and synergies of efforts;
- (c) Safeguards against duplication, or incentives for coherence and harmonization, should be developed to ensure a more efficient uptake of the analyses and conclusions of various research studies on migration and their influence on policymaking, as these same dimensions of migration are addressed by different organizations through different disciplinary lenses.

179. The examples offered by respondents to the questionnaire showed that some publications and studies were produced in cooperation or in consultation with other interested organizations, while others were not. This may cause the fragmentation and reproduction of research that already exists in the system and, in turn, the less efficient use of human and financial resources. Therefore, the need for collaborative research is paramount.

#### *Collaborative research*

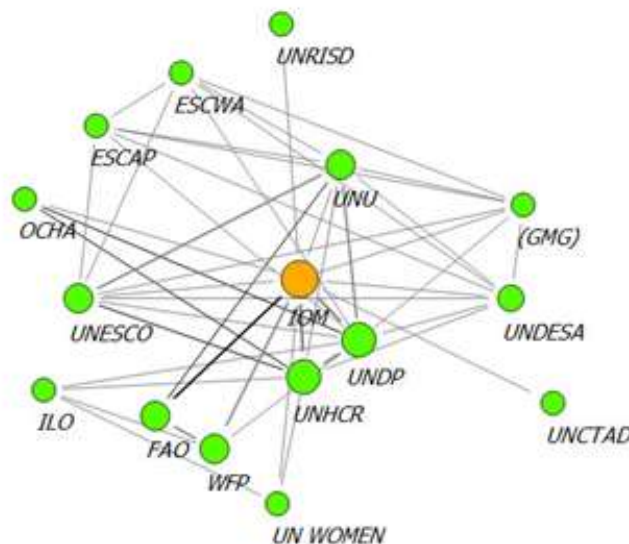
180. On the basis of the same customized questionnaire addressed to organisations that undertook research on, or whose work was related to migration, the Inspector tried to map the pattern of inter-agency collaborative research. The mapping was based on the responses to a specific question about the organizations' engagement in any form of cooperation with other United Nations entities prior to, during and after the research process. This mapping is not exhaustive, but it presents a sample of such interaction.

181. The 15 available examples of inter-agency collaborative research are summarized in table 3 below, while figure VI illustrates the relationships of the co-authors.

Table 3: **Samples of inter-agency collaborations in research projects on migration**

Projects	Collaborating organizations
Management of refugee data	DESA, UNHCR
Co-custody of SDG indicator 10.7.2 on countries with well managed migration policies	DESA, IOM
The 2018 Report on “Migration and Structural Transformation	UNCTAD, IOM
Impact of foreign direct investment by diaspora in Tunisia	UNDP, IOM
Six-country case studies on expanding access to economic opportunities for Syrian refugees and host communities	UNDP, ILO, WFP
Report on violence against women migrant workers	UN-Women, ILO, IOM, UNHCR, OHCHR
Study entitled “At the root of exodus: food security, conflict and international migration”	WFP, IOM, FAO
Joint analysis of data for the “Migration Pulse” initiative	WFP, IOM, FAO, World Bank
<i>Migration, Free Movement and Regional Integration (2017)</i>	UNESCO, UNU
<i>Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education: Building Bridges, Not Walls</i>	UNESCO, IOM, UNCHR, UNICEF
<i>Breaking the Impasse</i> study	OCHA, UNHCR, UNDP, IOM
Preliminary discussion on taking forward projects on migration	UNRISD, IOM
Research initiative on migration governance and policy in the Global South	UNU-WIDER, FAO
Research on migration and displacement in the context of climate change	UNU-EHS, IOM, UNHCR, UNDP
Collective contributions to the research outcomes of the Global Migration Group	DESA, UNDP, UNESCO, ESCAP, ESCWA, UNU, IOM, (GMG) <sup>51</sup>

Figure VI: **Inter-agency collaborations in migration research**



182. As limited in size as it may be, the above sample of cases, corroborated by information extracted from interviews, allowed the Inspector to note:

- (a) The collaborative research reflects, by and large, the necessity to add an interdisciplinary perspective to research activities;

<sup>51</sup> GMG is retained in the analysis not as an entity in itself, but as the point of convergence for some of the inter-agency collaborations.



- (b) The collaboration scheme is more the result of separate initiatives and case-by-case needs than a systematic process of collaboration characterized by joint agenda-setting, knowledge-sharing and the co-design and co-production of research based on the specific mandates and expertise of interested organizations;
- (c) While various undertakings do not necessarily converge, there are three vectors that indicate an emerging trend towards a more systematic collaborative research process:
- The presence of IOM as a specialized partner in most of the collaborations identified;
  - The role of DESA and IOM as co-custodians of Sustainable Development Goal indicator 10.7.2 on migration policies, which indicates an option towards a more systematic and demand-driven approach to policy research;
  - The use of a group for collective reflection, action and enhanced coherence.

183. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance coordination, coherence and effectiveness.

**Recommendation 8**

**The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations involved in the United Nations Network on Migration should instruct the relevant units to assess the options of inter-agency collaboration, on the basis of converging interests and specific competences, with regard to decision-making on migration-related research projects by the end of 2019.**

**C. Towards enhanced system-wide coherence**

**Global Migration Group**

184. The Global Migration Group (GMG), established in 2006 as a high-level inter-institutional group of agencies involved in migration-related activities, was mandated, inter alia, to encourage the adoption of more coherent, comprehensive and better-coordinated approaches to the issue of international migration. One of the key priorities of GMG was exchanging results and pooling efforts in regard to research, data collection and analysis. The Group's Multi-Annual Work Plan for 2016-2018 included a chapter on data and research, by which the Group committed to coordinating and guiding the collection and analysis of migration-related data from all sources, including strengthening the evidence base relating to crisis-related migration.

185. In October 2018, the GMG was replaced by the United Nations Network on Migration, which is committed to supporting the implementation, follow-up and review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. One of the objectives of the Network is to act as a source of ideas and reliable data, information and analysis on migration

186. The evolution of the institutional landscape on migration testifies to the need to bring together dispersed resources that essentially allow decision-makers, including in member States, to base their actions and decisions on solid, widely shared and accepted evidence-based knowledge.

**Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration**

187. The General Assembly triggered a process of intergovernmental negotiations for a global compact for migration through its resolution 71/280, entitled "Modalities for the intergovernmental

negotiations of the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration”, following the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.<sup>52</sup>

188. From the present report’s perspective of the potential of inter-agency collaboration and coordination of issues related to the Sustainable Development Goals, two fundamental elements contained in resolution 71/280 should be highlighted:

- (a) The explicit recognition of the need for enhanced coordination and for “a framework for comprehensive international cooperation on migrants and human mobility”, dealing with “all aspects of migration, including the humanitarian, developmental, human rights-related and other aspects of migration”;
- (b) The unambiguous designation of an organization as “the global lead agency on migration”.

189. The Global Migration Group, as a holder of collective expertise, and IOM, as lead agency, were called upon by the resolution to contribute to the preparatory process. The intergovernmental negotiations led to an agreed outcome, adopted in Morocco on 10 December 2018, as the “The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration”. One of the measures contained in the plan for its implementation was the establishment of the United Nations Network on Migration to replace the Global Migration Group.

**190. While the process leading to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration cannot be replicated as such, the Inspector appreciates that the developments related to policymaking, research and action related to migration, conducive to enhanced system-wide coherence, constitute a good practice which can be mirrored, mutatis mutandis, in other cross-cutting Sustainable Development Goal subjects.**

#### **Policy research component**

191. The new Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration includes research-related provisions. As stated in the text of the Compact, it is “an unprecedented review of evidence and data gathered during an open, transparent and inclusive process”. The Compact recognizes the need for efforts “to strengthen our knowledge and analysis of migration”, assuming as its first objective to “collect and utilize accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies”. Notably, IOM as lead agency has a dedicated function on migration policy research.

192. Also notably, the Compact placed a very useful emphasis on the contributions from academics by encouraging States to expand options for academic mobility, including through agreements that facilitate exchanges and other international research opportunities.

#### **The issue of repositories**

193. One of the questions raised for the case study was: “Is your Organization aware of any repository of research on migration in the United Nations system, accessible to all interested United Nations organizations?”. While the individual responses were clear, taken together they were rather puzzling, and denoted a less than clear picture.

194. Of the 14 respondents, 3 stated plainly and 2 implied that they were not aware of such repositories. The remaining nine respondents indicated various repositories, but never the same ones. The most commonly quoted were the databases of IOM, GMG and DESA. UNU offered the most comprehensive

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<sup>52</sup> United Nations, General Assembly (2016). *New York Declaration of Refugees and Migrants*, A/RES/73/1.

answer, which was not surprising, as it was the author of a compendium of policy-oriented research and analytical output issued by GMG.

195. From that perspective, the Inspector welcomes the inclusion, in the implementation outline of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, of essential elements aiming to strengthen policy research uptake, such as the establishment of a global knowledge platform to serve as a repository for existing evidence, practices and initiatives, and the creation of the United Nations Network on Migration to ensure effective and coherent system-wide support.

196. At the same time, the Inspector shares the view expressed by several interlocutors, in particular from IOM, who believe that a single repository as such is not a panacea for the facilitation of access, as the amount of research and analyses produced on the various aspects of migration has increased considerably in recent years. Similarly, it is worth noting the prevailing trend towards online publishing of academic and non-academic migration-related research studies. Finding the most efficient tools to digest and process existing research is essential, whether the research products are hosted in central or dispersed repositories.

197. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance collaboration and effectiveness.

**Recommendation 9**

**The governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should take measures to ensure that commitments to inter-agency collaboration, including through the establishment of a global data knowledge platform and the facilitation of academic exchanges, as stipulated in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, are implemented by the end of 2020.**

## VII. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

198. The present report has so far examined the internal mechanisms and processes of research and its use in the United Nations system. At this juncture, it is worth recalling that the kick-off for the present review was the round table, co-organized by UNU and the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies in April 2016, which included the participation of senior representatives from United Nations research and policy units as well as academics and researchers from outside the system. The main topic of the round table was the relationship between the United Nations system organizations and the external community of academia, research institutions and think tanks interested in the issues handled by the United Nations, in particular in the realm of the Sustainable Development Goals.

199. The round table identified certain critical challenges related to the efficient use of policy research produced in universities and specialized research institutes, notably:

- (a) The presence of disincentives to closer collaboration within both the United Nations and academia, in particular the insufficient rewarding of policy research in terms of professional advancement and political, bureaucratic and time constraints to engaging with or contributing to research;
- (b) The difficulties researchers face in navigating United Nations bureaucracy and politics and in overcoming United Nations confidentiality constraints;
- (c) The absence of a signalling mechanism for the United Nations that can communicate its research needs to the academic community;
- (d) Inadequate knowledge management systems within the United Nations to guide staff to relevant internal and external research.<sup>53</sup>

200. Taking the above conclusions as departure points, the review of the JIU tried to solicit data, information and opinions, and analyse challenges related to research functions, across the United Nations system through a comparative analysis of questionnaire responses and the development of a survey for the academic and research community, in addition to a comparative analysis of supporting documentation, previous evaluations and surveys submitted by organizations of the United Nations system.

201. The Inspector highlights the below observations and findings with regard to:

- (a) Internal challenges on policy research uptake;
- (b) External challenges as identified by the academic survey;
- (c) Challenges related to the science-policy interface.

### A. Internal challenges on policy research uptake

202. The uptake of research-based evidence in policymaking depends on numerous factors. These factors can be grouped into socio-political (political and socio-economic conditions, cultural and organizational change processes), networks (relationships between policy and research communities, networks, knowledge platforms, competition over funds) and evidence (validity, credibility, to what extent such evidence challenges established norms and common wisdom, knowledge-sharing).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> United Nations University, “Strengthening the UN’s research uptake: conference report”, 2016.

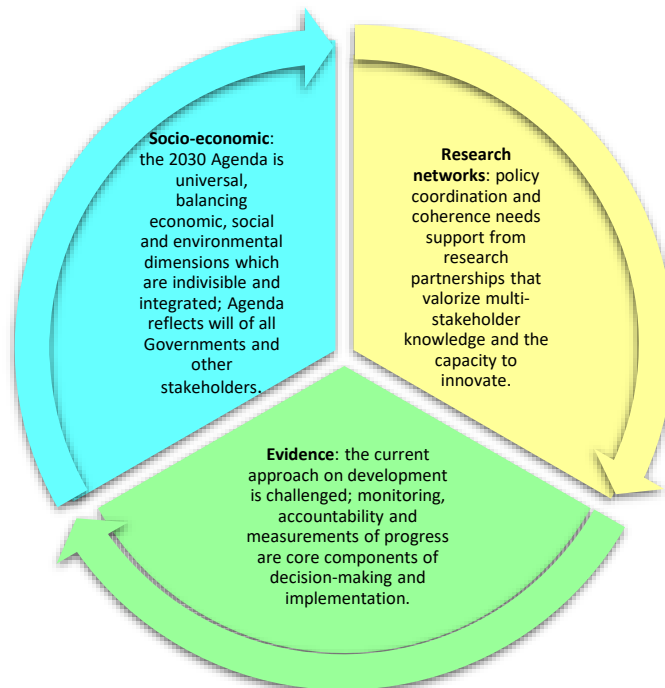
<sup>54</sup> See for example, Paul Cairney, *The Politics of Evidenced-Based Policy Making* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Stuart Shapiro, *Analysis and Public Policy: Successes, Failures and Directions for Reform* (Cheltenham, United Kingdom, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

203. Translated into the context of the 2030 Agenda, efficient research uptake should be underpinned by the following contextual factors:

- (a) **Socio-economic:** the 2030 Agenda is universal and attempts to balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in an indivisible and integrated manner. The Agenda reflects the common will of all Governments and other stakeholders. Consequently, the policy research undertaken, facilitated and stimulated by the United Nations organizations should not be conceived in narrow niches, but in an interdisciplinary, concerted and synergistic manner;
- (b) **Research networks:** Policy coordination and policy coherence, as demanded by Sustainable Development Goal 17, need the support of research partnerships that valorise multi-stakeholder knowledge, expertise and the capacity to innovate. Policy research in service of the Goals should open up and break silos at the global or national level. Therefore, the United Nations organizations should be more open than ever, in a more systematic and efficient way, to research produced in universities, research centres and think tanks;
- (c) **Evidence:** Monitoring and accountability, as well the need to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development, are core components of decision-making and implementation related to the 2030 Agenda. Policy research activities should also develop and strengthen the follow-up and the impact produced by their products.

Figure VII

**Contextual factors for research uptake relevant to the 2030 Agenda**



204. Taking all of the above factors into consideration, **the Inspector is of the view that the first step of a contextual approach leading towards a more efficient uptake is for all United Nations research units to act as a system-wide research network, based on a few guiding principles and modus operandi for communication and collaboration, including on ways to interact with non-United Nations research entities.** However, the review found a number of existing challenges that do not allow for such a holistic and cooperative approach, despite isolated good practices.

### a. Improving capturing and monitoring uptake

205. The majority of organizations consulted during the review highlighted the fact that current monitoring frameworks for policy research uptake are not entirely suitable for capturing the use and relevance of research products. Monitoring is usually limited to the end of the project/publication of a specific research output and relies heavily on downloads and, at best, citation metrics. Indeed, as is the case for pure academic works, the use of metrics with regard to the frequency of citations is easy to track and can give an initial understanding of the demand for the product in question. However, quantitative measurement cannot adequately capture the real value and use of the research product by different audiences. As one organization with a core research mandate noted: “The evidence [on uptake] tends to be circumstantial and anecdotal, such as through correspondence, conferences and conversations with relevant parties.”

206. The Inspector recognizes that policy processes are rarely linear or orderly. They are often shaped by a multitude of interacting actors and power dynamics. Any assessment of the research uptake capacity should remain alert to the subtle, diverse and unexpected ways in which research findings can seep into the arenas of decision over time.<sup>55</sup> Research findings often need to be contested, debated and tested repeatedly before consensus on recommendations for policy development and practice is reached. Simply signalling findings to policymakers with the expectation that they will be acted on has little chance of being successful.

207. For example, ECA and ESCWA track the number of requests received from member States as a follow-up to their normative work, and they often go a step further and evaluate the number of requests received versus the number of requests serviced by their organizations in order to follow uptake and impact. **The Inspector takes note of such practices and invites research managers across the United Nations system to develop, within the frameworks they find appropriate, relevant indicators to better assess the uptake process.**

208. Many organizations stressed the lack of staff and resources needed to conduct continuous and systematic engagement with stakeholders throughout the research process. Indeed, engagement should start much earlier in the research process cycle and forge incentives for sustained interaction with key audiences for the validation of research priorities and uptake of findings. The Inspector recognizes that such efforts are time-consuming and staff-intensive. Lack of resources for policy advocacy and the pressure to produce an often-excessive number of reports, under tight budgets, result in a focus on completing a publication in time. Inadvertently, resources to monitor uptake and impact in the long term are side-lined. Interviews indicated that even where resources and staff time were allocated, they were geared towards short-term reviews. As one organization noted: “Heavy workloads and numerous publications pose large burdens on staff time and pose obstacles for the capacity to monitor progress and impact in individual Member States.”

209. While organizations do sufficiently well in reporting activities and outputs, there is a need to enhance results-orientation in all aspects of monitoring and evaluation. Possible ways forward include, among other things: intensified efforts, with commensurate resources, to translate key policy messages into pilot projects or applications to ongoing programmes; follow-up evaluations after a reasonable timespan to understand actual uptake after initial media coverage; the engagement of local stakeholders

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<sup>55</sup> Sophie Sutcliffe and Julius Court, *A Toolkit for Progressive Policymakers in Developing Countries* (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2006).

from public institutions and civil society in disseminating recommendations; and social media campaigns to increase influence.

#### **b. Reducing duplication and fragmentation of research efforts**

210. The design and implementation of a global strategic framework for the 2030 Agenda requires the United Nations organizations to provide leadership in critical knowledge areas and development thinking, rebrand themselves to reduce overlap and fragmentation and pursue a coherent vision of sustainable development at national, regional and global levels.<sup>56</sup> The interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals requires research efforts geared towards understanding and analysing all the interacting drivers and identifying evidence-based policies that can respond to more than one issue at a time.

211. The review made clear the fragmentation or duplication of research efforts and resources within and among organizations. This is compounded for organizations that have a decentralized nature and lack a coordinated research strategy/department body. Fragmentation undermines transparency and poses risks of duplication of research efforts. Several organizations have signalled the need for a more coordinated and transparent way to pursue research outcomes for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. They proposed the creation of functional groups of researchers or research entities and collaborative cross-cutting outcomes for some Sustainable Development Goals. An illustration of the potential of such collaborative efforts is offered in the case study on migration (see chapter VI).

212. The review team identified other embryonic efforts to develop thematic “research hubs” and “strategic coalitions” (virtual communities of practice, scientific advisory groups, inter-agency task forces, etc.), to address particular research gaps and challenges. **The Inspector welcomes these initiatives and notes that there is scope to scale them up by collaboratively developing research agendas, including through partnerships and technical assistance, efficient monitoring systems and forging networks to promote policy research uptake.** This would involve proactively building coalitions and seeking out partnerships for collaboration that would help ensure that research is embedded in policy and that policy becomes an integral component of research programmes.

213. As already noted, precise information on the financial resources spent on policy research was not available for separate analysis. While the diversity of sources and adaptations to specific research undertakings is not a problem in itself, the lack of a comprehensive view on and predictable path for resources dedicated to research may pose a risk to the ability of United Nations organizations to pursue research activities in a coordinated and efficient manner and avoid fragmentation or duplication. On the other hand, the coordinated efforts of United Nations system organizations in terms of pooling financial resources would reduce this risk and promote interdisciplinary research.

#### **c. Improving risk management in policy research**

214. Interviews with key stakeholders from research departments across the United Nations system underlined that often researchers (defined as such in their job descriptions) have been conservative in risk-taking as a result of institutional, organizational or, in some cases, political pressures. Conservatism manifests itself in policy research as being excessively dominated by safe or less-controversial topics, recurrent themes and the replication of ideas among organizations, including with respect to the choice of research topics and methods. Researchers are not stimulated to find new ways to address basic issues

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<sup>56</sup> United Nations, *Papers by the Independent Team of Advisors to the ECOSOC Bureau: The Future We Want, the United Nations System We Need* — ECOSOC Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system (2016).

and often must follow bureaucratic imperatives rather than stimulating their staff to carry out research. In other cases, meeting administrative imperatives rather than novelty and quality requires them to sacrifice presumed intellectual autonomy.

215. By externalizing research tasks excessively to individual consultants sought and found in a comfort zone, whose performances are not always rigorously assessed, the organizations become consultancy dependent. Even the use of consultancy companies is not at all risk free. Several interviews suggested that big consortiums and consultancy companies, to which the United Nations system makes frequent recourse, sometimes recombine basic concepts and make ad-hoc adjustments in terminology just to reflect the specific mandate of the requesting organization. As a result, the sense of ownership and the probability of robust uptake are diminished.

216. The logic and timeline of intergovernmental processes directly serviced by United Nations policy research also seems to reward the extension of existing knowledge, which prompts the staff to concentrate on recurrent topics and limited disciplinary perspectives. While this tendency is successful in the short term, as it bypasses the peaks and bottlenecks of intergovernmental processes, it may be detrimental to the quest for transformative solutions for global problems of a pressing nature.

**217. The Inspector invites the Executive Heads to adopt a long-term vision for research that rewards the creation of new knowledge products and instils a culture of pushing boundaries, versus recurrent, short-term successes.**

#### **d. Facilitating access to digital research products**

218. Access to and the use of United Nations research at the system-wide level, despite its abundance, is difficult, as there is no transparent and comprehensive signalling mechanism for the United Nations that can communicate its research needs or products to the academic/scientific community. A preliminary desk review of research products for the three main pillars of the United Nations indicated that at least 32 different websites would have to be visited to search for research products on human rights, 26 for peace and security and 43 for development. These figures should by no means be considered exhaustive, as they only point to the tip of the iceberg: they do not include publications from country offices, special missions or regional centres. The figures do, however, illustrate the difficulties encountered in accessing United Nations research products that are theoretically available on the Internet but are posted on disparate platforms.

219. It is worth noting that more than half of the participating organizations stated that they would find it useful to have a system-wide space to collaborate/coordinate and share opinions, research plans and visions. An incremental approach for such collaboration should be encouraged. United Nations libraries may play a critical role in this respect. The Inspector welcomes the steps already taken by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, which is developing a central repository for the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations digital commons. The repository contains research products for public use, and it incorporates promotional tools for the content. The repository is based on semantic technologies which allow machine-to-machine scholarly communication, interoperability based on international standards and online analytics that can support such efforts. Though a central repository for the United Nations Secretariat at first, later it should become central to the United Nations system as a whole. The United Nations libraries in Geneva, Beirut and Vienna are also contributing with their content through this new platform.

220. The Central United Nations repository caters to the systematized sharing of results with audiences both internal and external to the United Nations. It aims to present an integrated picture of United



Nations research results, a one-stop point on the Internet, and at the same time preserve the historic value of the United Nations research products in a standardized manner; in its latter role, it tries to enhance scientific reproducibility (and verification). **The Inspector notes that, ultimately, the platform aims to improve the research value and visibility of United Nations digital outputs, which are currently residing, unconnected, on numerous United Nations websites and in a plethora of diverse, online databases.** An integrated, comprehensive approach to the United Nations digital research output will facilitate and stimulate access to institutional information that is more meaningful and less time-consuming for researchers, policy/decision-makers and the public.

### **B. Challenges related to the research-policy interface**

221. On the issue of challenges, the review team solicited views from both JIU participating organizations and the academic communities (see chapter VIII). The following main challenges converged from both categories.

#### **a. Addressing the need for multilingualism**

222. **Inadequate consideration for multilingualism** was a concern for a number of responders. The findings were corroborated by the responses of several organizations to the JIU corporate questionnaire, whereby they considered the limited resources for the translation of key products into languages other than English to be a key impediment to uptake. The critical importance of multilingualism with regard to better serving the interests of member States is duly recognized and acknowledged. However, business realities and meagre resources dedicated to research make it challenging for organizations to invest in translating United Nations reports into all official languages.

223. The Inspector noted, however, that the translation of research products into languages other than the original is not an end in itself, and that automatic approaches may be inefficient. That need should be addressed in relation to the target audience, the nature of the topic and the estimated demand for specific research products. The Inspector notes that the UNESCO Publications Guidelines developed a matrix for the selection of language versions according to the publication category, the nature of distribution (commercial, free, online), and typical target audiences (policymakers, the public at large, scientists/researchers, educators, specialized media, UNESCO networks, etc.).<sup>57</sup> The Inspector also notes that UNRISD forged partnerships for the uptake and translation of its flagship publications with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and others, in their respective languages.

224. Moreover, the advancement of digital technology imposes some changes to the practice of translating documents into all official languages on an equal footing, as traditionally seen in the United Nations system. Currently, a free online service instantly translates words, phrases and web pages from English into more than 100 other languages. It is expected that the quality of such translations will soon meet high standards. While reiterating the importance of translating the research products into the languages of the end users, the Inspector believes that the issue of multilingualism should also be seen in the light of current openly available technological advances.

#### **b. Bridging the gap between research production and policymaking**

225. **Timing of policy research for academics/scientist and policymakers.** Fundamental tensions exist between the timing required for academic/scientific research and the information needs associated

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<sup>57</sup> UNESCO, Bureau of Public Information, UNESCO Publications Guidelines (BPI.2009/WS/7 REV 3), appendix 10.

with efficient policy development and programme delivery. Developing robust scientific evidence and knowledge to support lasting and durable solutions to address ongoing or emerging global challenges requires time, resources, the free and open exchange of information and the use of local knowledge. This knowledge then needs to be placed in an appropriate format for decision-making.

226. Striking the right balance for policy relevant research – one that allows for a robust evidence base while ensuring timely inputs for policy development purposes – is challenging but essential. Policymakers are often faced with tight timeframes; they frequently demand short, clearly written synopses of research findings that can shed light towards one policy option over another. As one government representative noted, research outputs for policy consideration are drafted in a very short timespan, as representatives are often requested to issue advice within hours. However, academics are driven by the need for scientific innovation, rigour and excellence over prolonged periods of time. The rules, incentives and institutional architecture that distinguish the academic/research field are intended to encourage careful and methodical reflection on the topics examined. The researchers often find it challenging to respond to the fast-paced needs and demands of policymakers.

227. Thus, critical issues arise with regard to the conversation and translation that are needed to bridge the gap between academic research and applied decision-making. To make policy research useful for policymaking and implementation, the findings need to be translated and interpreted, taking into consideration specific policy contexts. It is of critical importance that researchers articulate the relevance of their work in an action-oriented way. To allow constructive engagement to take place, mutual understanding of the needs and challenges of both academia and policymakers is necessary.

228. Many organizations found that convening policy dialogues with member States, on the basis of research findings, had high potential to improve the efficient use of policy research. Establishing and maintaining quid pro quo for research uptake, however, requires much more than one meeting. As senior research managers often indicated, successful uptake is contingent on sustained working relationships and partnerships with policymakers, involving discussions over initial results, options and the consequences of research findings.

229. The idea of connecting with networks of advisers through advisory committees was mentioned by several organizations as a useful avenue for meaningful engagement. Some organizations made use of them on an ad hoc basis, i.e. to be convened when necessary. Sustained relationships with individuals can also be either informal (maintained through professional networks), or formal (organized through panels of experts, advisory committees or similar arrangements). Such structures enable researchers and academics to establish a robust understanding of intergovernmental processes of negotiation and policymaking.

### **c. Improving system-wide coherence and coordination in research**

230. **Absence of a research coordinating mechanism for research functions.** Other than the 2016 round table, which rang a timely bell on the flaws and challenges in policy research uptake, the present review did not identify a collaborative effort among research entities and functions in the United Nations system.

231. The research function in the United Nations (whether that research is produced internally or externally using contractors), remains splintered, as there is currently no overarching research policy or management structure that has the authority or resources to provide overall advice, vision, direction, standards or guidelines and also knit the research functions of United Nations system organizations (including the regional economic commissions), the UNU network and other institutes together. As one

organization indicated: *“United Nations research is less than the sum of its parts. In fact, often the incentives promote competition for resources rather than collaboration. Both the understanding of the role of research, and the voice of research in the United Nations, are weak.”*

232. As an autonomous and specialized entities in policy research, UNRISD acknowledged the need for a system-wide vision to articulate the rationale for research that informs the policies, programmes and norm-setting processes of the United Nations organizations. The understanding of the differences between research conducted in the United Nations and other types of “external” research, and the recognition of the value of each, are part of such an articulation. A balance should be sought between practically oriented research (with immediate use and application) and long-term strategic research that can identify future trends and ensure that the United Nations is at the forefront of those trends.

233. The institutional mechanisms and processes to bring research to its deserved place on the agendas of various organizations also need strengthening. The Inspector notes that these system-wide considerations should be taken into account by the Secretary-General while assessing the work of the research institutes, as he committed himself in his reports of June and December 2017 entitled “Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda”.<sup>58</sup>

234. In view of the importance of policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda, the Inspector shares the converging views collected during the review, namely that the voice of the research function in the United Nations system should be better articulated and heard.

235. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance the impact and efficiency of policy research.

**Recommendation 10**

**The General Assembly should take measures to elevate the representation and the use of policy briefs produced by the specialized research entities of the United Nations system, based upon a report to be submitted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, at the latest during its seventy-fourth session (2019-2020).**

**C. Strengthening research skills and internal capacities for uptake**

236. Research managers should review internal capacities through skills mapping and identify areas where further improvements for uptake can be made. Despite the fact that most research managers interviewed would agree with the above statement, pressures from yearly budget cycles often compromise the informed prioritization of research initiatives that require longer-term commitments and improved staff capacities.

237. Solutions seem to suggest the need to more explicitly acknowledge the role of research in strategic planning by recognizing its complexities and the institutional measures needed to address them, and by improving existing mechanisms for collaboration with regard to the production and dissemination of results. Internal and external capacities to undertake such tasks as producing, analysing and promoting the policy-relevant uptake of evidence need to be further developed. In turn, within

<sup>58</sup> See A/72/124 – E/2018/3 and A/72/684-E/2018/7.

organizations, interoperability across different departments that bring together evidence chains needs to be streamlined further by duly recognizing each department's value to the process.

238. Special toolkits and courses exist within different organizations. The UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti has a specialized course on research uptake, while ILO and WHO provide guidance on policy research. Managers are also seeking to provide improved professional opportunities for advancements on research. The ECA administrative instruction on incentives for professional staff in policy research and knowledge delivery<sup>59</sup> sets out, inter alia, the expected minimum contribution on policy research for staff at different levels. In addition, it requests that research and publications be agreed in advance with supervisors and be formally recorded and recognized through the Performance Management and Development System. A service-recognition scheme was proposed in 2014 for those staff members who demonstrated high levels of research productivity as measured by the quality, pertinence and diversity of research outputs.

239. Some organizations have made efforts to improve staff research skills through specialized workshops and training courses, or have improved incentives by rewarding activities such as innovative research and voluntary contributions to scientific/academic journals. For example, ECLAC encourages its staff to contribute their research to the *CEPAL Review*, an open access journal with a wide audience in the region.

240. ILO, WFP and FAO have a fellowship programme in place aimed at attracting scientific knowledge; however, its performance has not always been conclusive. Each year, ILO makes available visiting scholar arrangements. Staff secondment, exchanges among organizations and the promotion of sabbatical leave programs were identified as useful pathways. A key concern among several research managers was that the lack of flexibility in administrative rules and procedures, as well as the time investment required to service intergovernmental processes, did not support or reward creativity and innovation, nor did they attract research talent.

241. Research managers advised that an improvement in this direction would involve forward-looking strategies to develop staff recruitment, and retention strategies that were specially designed to attract qualified researchers and subsequently stimulate them to produce innovative policy research. Such pathways would also require the existence of attractive career paths and the encouragement of exchanges of research staff among organizations, secondment and rotation, knowledge-sharing, strategic alliances and multidisciplinary diversification.

242. Finally, informed prioritization, and incentives for managers to reward research in terms of performance evaluation and professional advancement, could also encourage the efficient use of policy research. ECA, ESCAP and UNICEF offer some examples to this effect, as those entities conduct internal evaluations meant to identify subsequent changes. More importantly, DESA and UNODC encourage their staff to publish research work in academic journals.

243. The Inspector believes that in an era of transparency and freedom of expression, the conditions imposed on the United Nations staff who are interested in conducting research and have the analytical and writing skills to do so are not stimulating. Some staff members referred to discouraging administrative rules related to this area. Staff should be encouraged to publish rather than be inhibited by rules, without prejudice to personal and professional accountability for their public positions.

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<sup>59</sup> ST/ECA/AI/2014/003.

244. For example, according to paragraph 8 of information circular ST/IC/2006/30, “*outside activities that are of benefit to the Organization or the achievement of its goals and/or contribute to the development of professional skills of staff members are usually not only permitted but encouraged*”. However, according to paragraph 7 (d) of the same circular, submitting articles, books or other material for publication is subject to prior authorization.

**245. The Secretary-General and the Executive Heads of the United Nations organizations who have not yet done so should revisit the rules and regulations related to the publication in specialized journals of the research findings of interested staff, so as to eliminate undue restrictions and conditions and to encourage the staff to engage in research and publishing activities.**

#### **D. Challenges related to the relationships between the United Nations and the academic communities**

246. The first of the three open questions addressed through the academic survey was: “What are the main challenges you or your institution experienced with respect to policy research uptake while working with the United Nations system?”

247. The respondents submitted more than 300 such challenges. On the basis of the frequency and the relevance of the answers, the Inspector clustered the main challenges, as highlighted by the respondents, into four categories.

248. Information and communication: lack of awareness regarding the specific research interests of the United Nations, difficult access to the information from the organizations and their communication channels, lack of proactive processes on the part of the United Nations to engage academia, absence of systemic interaction and effective networking, no genuine interest and no visibility for academic research.

249. Other respondents were more specific. One stated that “it is difficult to find contact persons who could be interested in the work done at the Universities”. Another, on the basis of direct experience, noted that:

Most research activities are driven by individuals within the United Nations system. However, once the individual leaves the organization or is transferred, there are no efforts made to pursue the research anymore in the system. There is less chance of research continuity in the absence of individual.

251. Selection of research topics and researchers: a few responses can be quoted as such, as they expressed direct criticism of the way the United Nations is perceived: “Researches that are deemed ‘relevant’ to the United Nations [...] are often those that reproduce dominant discourses and representations”, not those that “challenge the way we think about international politics”; “the United Nations seems to engage only with well-known researchers, and does very little to seek out and engage with young brilliant researchers”; “studies were conducted [by universities] but were used by private consultants”.

252. Bureaucratic hurdles and lack of transparency: “the system appears exceedingly bureaucratic and lacks transparency about how it proceeds”; difficulty in “finding subject-matters that can take effective action”; “assertiveness and narrow-mindedness of United Nations institutions and officers”; “decision-

making processes are either very formal, or very informal through corridor conversations”; “United Nations bureaucracy tends to be a closed circle”.

253. Connection between the researchers and United Nations policy-makers: “Policy staff do not read academic papers in their field. Mostly they think they do not need to as they know it already”; “policy makers are not interested in research, in particular if interdisciplinary”; “lack of opportunities to disseminate. Need to have more research seminars or conferences co-organized by the United Nations and universities/academic networks”; “lack of budgets to conduct systematically relevant scientific literature”<sup>60</sup>; “the gap between research agendas and specific policy requirements”; “Member States do not view academic produced research as authoritative”; “the distance between policy/decision makers and people working on the ground”.

254. A more elaborated response may count as a synthesis of these views of the academic world. For that respondent, the main challenge is:

The lack of strategy and support/resources from the research side to streamline knowledge in a format that is adequate for uptake in policy process and the preference in the United Nations system for consultancy, limited interest for or even fear of debate around uncertainty areas that are central to the pertinence of research contribution.

255. The Inspector notes that these views of the academic communities regarding the main challenges pertaining to the relationship between United Nations organizations and academic communities are not just pertinent, but correspond, to a considerable extent, to views expressed by United Nations research managers.

**256. The Inspector invites research managers throughout the United Nations system to seek the views of academia and to engage in strategic dialogue with external researchers and research institutions with a view to collaboratively analysing challenges of a systemic nature.** Such dialogue and joint reflection should not be limited to specific cases of collaboration or projects.

**257. The Inspector also recommends that the Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations and the Chief Librarians who have not yet done so stimulate interested staff to write – from their professional perspective - book reviews, thus disseminating the findings of research conducted by academics and researchers.**

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<sup>60</sup> The insufficient funding of research was very frequently cited as a main challenge by respondents. As funding was not part of the scope of the survey, the analysis of the academic survey focused on relationships, processes, mechanisms and other institutional aspects. On the other hand, as already noted, the overwhelming majority of Joint Inspection Unit participating organizations could not offer figures on financial resources spent on research.

## VIII. ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY RESEARCH UPTAKE

### A. Respondents

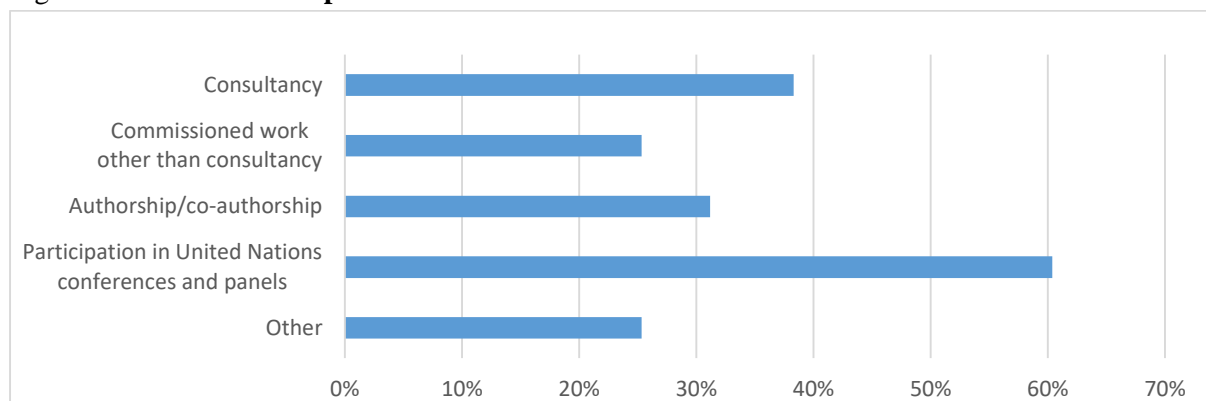
258. One of the main original objectives of the JIU review was to identify ways for the United Nations system to make the best use of external knowledge resources from major non-United Nations research protagonists (academia, research institutes, think tanks, etc.) and to improve collaboration between the United Nations system and the academic community. To some extent, the key issues related to such collaboration, from the perspective of United Nations organizations, were explored through the corporate questionnaire. However, the letter and the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal 17, on global partnerships, prompted the Inspector to include qualified and informed representatives of the academic networks directly.

259. Thanks to the prompt positive reaction and genuine interest of WASD, ACUNS, the International Studies Association, UNESCO networks and CNRS,<sup>61</sup> a 13-question survey was circulated to their respective memberships. The JIU expresses its full gratitude to the leadership of the five networks, whose efforts were rewarded by the excellent participation of academics from all over the world, from the North and South, covering three linguistic intellectual spaces (English, French and Arabic).

260. A total of 492 respondents, representing mainly educational institutions (40.5 per cent) and research institutions (37.4 per cent), participated in the survey. The other respondents were individual scholars (7.5 per cent) or representatives of think tanks (5.7 per cent).

261. Certainly the main purpose of the survey was to collect and integrate views and proposals on the efficient use by the United Nations system of research produced externally by academic or research communities, which have their own experience with the system. Nevertheless, the survey was meant to be taken not only by academics who have been effectively involved in concrete cooperation activities with the United Nations organizations, but also by potential future collaborators and contributors to the research needed by the United Nations system to fulfil its role. In fact, a majority of the participants in the survey (52.2 per cent) were directly or indirectly involved in research related to the work of the United Nations system. Among those who were involved in some form with United Nations entities, the most cited was participation in United Nations conferences and panels, followed by consultancy and authorship/co-authorship (60.4 per cent, 38.3 per cent and 31.2 per cent, respectively) (figure VIII).

Figure VIII. Nature of respondents' involvement with United Nations research



262. UNESCO, UNDP and UNU were the three most involved United Nations entities that benefited directly or indirectly from such involvement, with shares of 51.3 per cent, 19.5 per cent and 10.4 per cent, respectively. That distribution, though, should not be overestimated, as the UNESCO Chairs

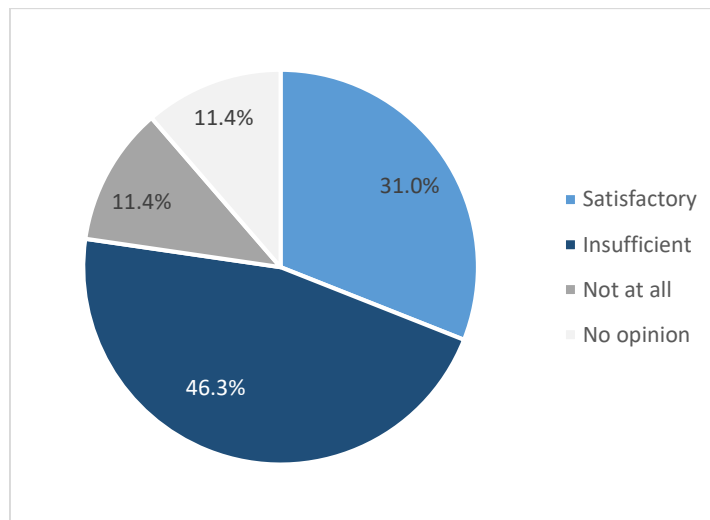
<sup>61</sup> The five academic networks are listed in the order in which they were contacted.

participated in the survey and the main areas of responsibility for UNESCO are science and education. While those figures should be taken *cum grano salis*, the configuration of the partnership affiliations assured high-quality participation and knowledge.

### B. Overall perception of the interaction

263. It was obvious that external research organizations experienced obstacles with regard to accessing relevant information and interlocutors in the United Nations system. A majority of respondents believed their access to such United Nations resources were either insufficient or not available at all (46.29 per cent and 11.35 per cent, respectively), while 31 per cent of respondents said they had satisfactory access to United Nations interlocutors and information (see figure IX).

Figure IX. Access to United Nations information and interlocutors



264. An issue of interest was to ascertain to what extent the 2030 Agenda mapped the research priorities of non-United Nations researchers. When asked the question “How are the SDG related topics reflected in the current research activities of your university (institute/think tank (or similar))?”, a majority of respondents agreed that their organizations systematically or selectively reflected SDGs in their research (28.82 per cent and 46.29 per cent, respectively) (see figure X). That finding is proof of the genuine interest of the academic milieu in the 2030 Agenda and the vision behind it.

265. However, respondents believed that their research products were far from well used: more than 60 per cent of respondents felt that the United Nations system used their academic research products insufficiently or not at all (see figure XI). Asked about the influence of external research on United Nations decision-making and norm-setting, the majority of respondents (62.1 per cent) admitted that the research had insufficient or no influence at all.



Figure X  
SDG related topics reflected in academic research

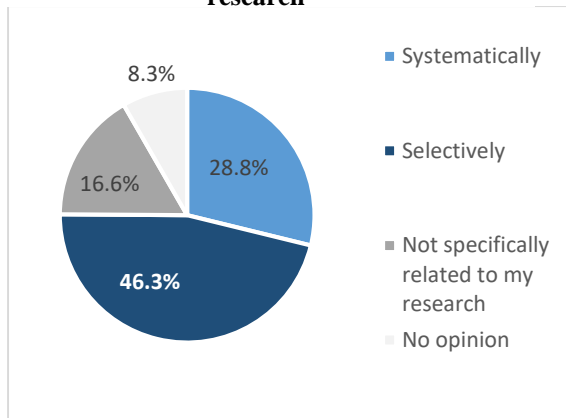
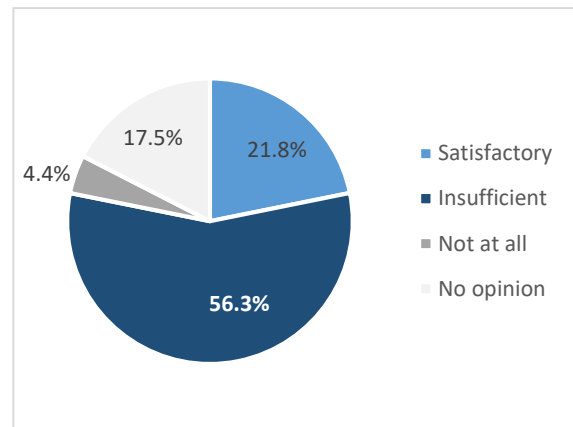


Figure XI  
Use of external research by the United Nations



266. The Inspector is compelled to note that the perception of the 492 survey respondents is rather negative with regard to all four dimensions of the intellectual traffic between the United Nations and the academic community: the reflection of SDGs in the research agenda of the academic community; access to United Nations information and interlocutors; the adequate use of research; and the influence of that research on decision-making. Consequently, there is considerable room for improvement, and the views of the academic community on challenges and solutions are of particular importance.

267. Besides the multiple-choice questions the academic survey also contained 3 open-ended questions on challenges, the characteristics of policy research uptake and cooperation between the United Nations system and the academic communities:

- What are the main challenges you or your institution experienced with respect to policy research uptake while working with the United Nations system?
- In your opinion, what are the key characteristics of an efficient policy research uptake?
- If you were to make one recommendation to build bridges between the United Nations policies and practices, on the one hand, and the academic community, on the other hand, what would that be?

268. Not surprisingly, the responses were rich and diverse in nature. They echoed in many respects the findings from the United Nations interlocutors, in particular with regard to challenges. In several other respects, the United Nations research system looks gloomier for the academic world than for United Nations officials.

269. Numerous interesting recommendations have been made. Critical or constructive opinions are all the more valid and meaningful as they come from professional academics and researchers. The limits of the present report do not allow for extensive reflection on the views collected through the survey, but selected samples or ideas are reflected in this chapter and in other sections of the report.

270. The views of academics on the existing challenges in the uptake of external research by the United Nations system were synthesized in chapter VII. But their contributions have not been limited to criticism. The respondents do have a constructive vision and realistic ideas on solutions. The sections below address the two remaining issues dealt with in the academic survey.

### C. Characteristics of efficient policy research uptake

271. The main recurrent themes that emerged from the responses to the question “What are the key characteristics that make policy research uptake efficient?” were: (a) partnerships, (b) engagement and (c) contextualization.

#### (a) Partnerships

272. Respondents highly valued systematic and predictable partnerships, as they allow for, inter alia:
- Engagement, discussion and involvement with all levels of staff and management, with the intent to improve and implement policies
  - Well-coordinated and timely responses from stakeholders and collaborative decision-making
  - Effective communication channels and the institutional and non-institutional promotion of research policies
  - More involvement of researchers in determining and monitoring United Nations policies
  - Long-term collaboration, allowing just-in-time episodes to rely on more-solid research
  - Testing of research findings using real decision-making processes
  - Awareness of the realities faced in the application of research findings on the ground
  - Co-construction of research agendas, on the basis of simultaneous conceptual and operational thinking

#### (b) Engagement

273. The main ingredients for a policy of active engagement by researchers and policymakers in problem-solving would include the following:

- Identifying concrete problems and recommending solutions
- A willingness to listen to different actors and perspectives and provide feedback to participants
- The decentralization of decision-making powers on research programmes and on the choice of specific topics with the involvement of national research institutions and other local constituencies
- Alliances and social networks with other researchers and other relevant stakeholders in society
- Open call for applications: engaging research in a more transparent way
- Detecting new research findings and putting forward policy challenges to a broader research audience

274. In the concise words of one respondent, efficient policy research uptake is characterized by an engagement process which: “*ensures that all actors and partners, everyone from different communities of practices will coordinate their discourses, tools and interests*”.

#### (c) Contextualization

275. Contextualization is seen as an effort to maximize the adaptation of the research agenda to the concrete needs and specificities of SDGs, in order to guarantee more efficient uptake. Contextualization includes:

- Promotion of interdisciplinarity, with a focus on issues rather than disciplines
- Systematic and impartial identification of stakeholders and relevant epistemic capabilities

- Tailoring the extent of, and the norms for the participation of stakeholders in policy processes
- Identifying real demand for research-based evidence from policymakers
- Better knowledge of the actual conditions in which research takes place
- Undertaking systematic research based on requests related to the Goals
- Cultivating the ability to take case studies into consideration
- Identifying temporalities (short-, medium- and long-term perspectives) and differentiating recommendations according to their targets
- Providing support and incentives to researchers with field experience
- Proposing interaction in different languages

276. Again, one of the respondents synthesized the essential nature of the contextualization cluster:

Efficient and timely research systems that deliver the right kind of evidence at the right time, encouragement and facilitation of discourse among all stakeholders, and an enabling environment--flexible systems and procedures that support the change.

277. Respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that academics and researchers should have more systematic and predictable cooperation with the United Nations system. They also wished for more visibility, better involvement in policy debates and a more efficient use of their research products by policymakers.

#### **D. Building bridges between the United Nations and the academic/research communities**

278. Not surprisingly, JIU collected over 200 recommendations and suggestions in response to this third open-ended question of the survey. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated keen interest in, and good knowledge of, the United Nations system. They also displayed a comprehensive vision and creativity as to how the academic community sees its collaboration with the United Nations system in policy research in a way that may help with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>62</sup>

279. At this juncture, the Inspector ought to thank warmly, this time individually, to all members of WASD, ACUNS, ISA, UNESCO Chairs and CNRS for the time they took in making so many proposals, in different, but converging forms.

280. The selection hereafter of a few *expressis verbis* proposals is, on the one hand, a way to give well-deserved credit to the JIU academic interlocutors and survey respondents, and, on the other, a preamble to the recommendations the Inspector made in the current report that echo the academic perspectives.

281. **On improving mutual information and communication:** “a direct communication channel [that] facilitates the access to United Nations policies and practices and promotes the role of United Nations institutions as a bridge between academy and national stakeholders”; “special format in the media (television, radio, internet) [...] in which the academic community and the public of the countries are regularly informed in the main United Nations languages”; a database/roster of “academic institutions and their interests” [...] that would “allow [researchers] to receive [United Nations policies]

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<sup>62</sup> The method used for the survey was inspired by a concept of qualitative comparative analysis, from which two essential prerequisites were extrapolated and adapted: (a) focus on academics who were engaged in or were interested in engaging in the (non-academic) United Nations realm; (b) condensing responses to specific open-ended questions to complement the generic qualitative aspects collected through the perception survey. For qualitative comparative analysis methodology, see Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy and Jane Tinkler, *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How Academics and their Research Make a Difference* (London, Sage Publications, 2014).

information of interest to academic institutions”; “the opening of better spaces for connection and communication between the United Nations and the academic/research communities; for example, open calls through the Internet to participate in the reflection on topics of common interest”; “a dedicated website with regular updates of agendas, with opening up of regular surveys offered to the academic community, plus tools for academics to really address the United Nations and be answered back when they do so”. Added to those suggestions, a very candid, but meaningful, testimony: “researchers want first their work recognized and disseminated. The United Nations could be a wonderful way for dissemination through a peer review publication in line”.

**282. On upgrading the involvement of the academic communities in the selection of research topics:** “to know better what are the new policy issues and what academia is producing that can be relevant to decision makers”; “a joint publication, joint decision-making, staff exchanges so that the United Nations staffs would develop research knowledge while the faculties would understand United Nations policies and system”; “win-win initiatives where United Nations [...] could orient their programmes and actions on relevant scientific literature, and where academics could be rewarded in working/getting funds”; “the United Nations should structure a “call for research/synthesis” where academics could apply [...] in order to perform the desired state-of-the-art on a specific topic determined by a United Nations agency”; “assembling United Nations practitioners and academic researchers in the field, for short seminars along with local informants and up-to-date documentation”; “the establishment of a United Nations website where all United Nations agencies will download their research agendas of different teams working the respective topics (agency or discipline specific)”; “taking into account the result of academic research instead of framing the answer of what academic research has to do”; “accepting recommendations [...] that are not simple reproductions of old paradigms, the United Nations could benefit from more radical and productive tools”.

**283. On institutionalizing systematic and sustainable forms of interaction:** “an office dedicated to universities – United Nations collaboration”; “encouragement of United Nations staff to get involved in research, through joint publications with scholars”; “training of academics on the structures, general principles and objectives of the United Nations from a legal perspective”; “more interfaces and frameworks that allow the development of a common culture of collaboration with research”; “define long terms agendas, recruit academics on the basis of a long term collaboration and [...] allowing fluidity and reactivity in their mobility linked to the collaboration”; “in specific domains [...] regular meetings between [United Nations], policy stakeholders and academics”; “digital platforms”, “expert committees”, “core group of experts [...] whose job [would be] to use academic and research institute contacts in member States to provide expert advice”; “networks of researchers and academics should be established on specific policy domains in order to elaborate best practices and recommendations, promote a common working culture [...] and be used as pools of expertise”; “re-establish the ACUNS/United Nations sabbatical programmes that allowed United Nations staff to spend nine months in academia working in a project jointly elaborated between the United Nations entity and the university”.

**284.** The Inspector interprets all these proposals as reflecting the need for more predictable, systematic, inclusive, participatory, engaging and mutually beneficial forms of partnerships. One of the respondents to the academic survey actually defined such partnerships:

Sustained collaboration, through dialogues, think tanks, regular exchange on the occasion of academic organizations' conferences...are crucial and should be promoted. This would help better understanding of perspectives, sharing of concerns and frames and development of common language towards more focused solutions. This would also allow academic knowledge to be planned and developed more

consistently in view of its policy relevance, while allowing United Nations agencies to involve the scholarly community on a regular basis.

285. The Inspector was overwhelmed by the richness of the suggestions made by such a qualified audience and took those suggestions as a testimony of interest in the United Nations. The limits of the report compelled the Inspector to digest this valuable information into a couple of recommendations, which were validated not only by the academic community, but were also confirmed during the review by several United Nations officials who dealt with policy research. The proposals made by the academic communities may serve as inspiration for concrete forms of implementation of the following recommendations.

286. Policy research uptake is also highly relevant to the ongoing reform of the United Nations development system. The Secretary-General of the United Nations identified the use of system-wide integrated policy analysis as one of the main functions of the reform system to support Member States and other stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The implementation of the following recommendations is expected to improve inter-agency collaboration and stimulate interaction with the academic communities.

**Recommendation 11**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director General of UNESCO should consider the creation, on an experimental and voluntary basis, of a United Nations – Academic Joint Publication Board with the task of identifying research needs at the system-wide level and the most efficient ways to produce, disseminate and uptake policy research in a collaborative and participatory manner, by the end of 2020 at the latest.**

287. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance the predictability of cooperation with the academic communities.

**Recommendation 12**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in consultation with all Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations, should encourage long-term partnerships with academic communities at the global, regional and national levels, and establish basic guidelines for such partnerships.**

## IX. THE WAY FORWARD: MAKING UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH SUSTAINABLE

288. As a major form of organizational learning, research plays a special role because of its assumed objectivity and reliability. The United Nations should act as a catalyst and a custodian of knowledge produced by research inside or outside the system. The actual research uptake is the culmination of a process that involves resources and, therefore, can be conducted more or less efficiently. JIU noticed the paradoxical contrast between visibility of some research products of the United Nations system and the much lower visibility of resources and processes involved in research. JIU also observed that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development could be a game-changer in the existing research policies and practices.

289. In working on this first-ever comprehensive system-wide review on policy research uptake, the project team faced some inherent limitations during the preparation of the report and had to narrow both its scope and depth. Nevertheless, the mapping of the current state of affairs in policy research and its uptake, the institutional research landscape as described and the challenges, gaps and flaws as identified, may provide a much more solid foundation for a more ambitious undertaking in the future.

290. A minimum impact expected from the present report would be:

- Raised awareness about the still-underused potential of policy research and continued action to enhance research uptake and use in policymaking, in particular in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- Improved transparency in the use of resources during the entire research cycle in United Nations system organizations
- A minimal set of policies and rules in all United Nations organizations, which would guarantee that research agenda-setting, the choice of research products and producers and quality assurance processes are conducted systematically and with a permanent concern for efficient uptake
- Maximized use of quality research on global issues of common interest, produced by external academic and research communities for the United Nations system, by proactively seeking partnerships with such communities
- More systematic forms of exchanges and partnerships with universities, research institutions and think tanks from a broader geographic area, with an emphasis on the inclusion of the research potential of the global South
- Recalibration of research processes to better fit the needs of the 2030 Agenda by mainstreaming interdisciplinary and collaborative research

291. In a nutshell, the implementation of formal and soft recommendations contained in the report may strengthen uptake. Such an improvement should be understood as a permanent aspiration to a more robust cumulative impact of research produced and distributed across the United Nations system.

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292. The review led to an overarching conclusion: research is an activity that refuses to sit in individual boxes, despite the still-prevailing tendencies of United Nations organizations to work in silos. Once the research area absorbs the changes proposed by the present report, future reviews of the policy research function in the United Nations system could explore in greater depth a number of issues that do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all answers, but are worth being analysed to inspire lessons and further action, including:

- What are the ways and means to enhance the capacity of the United Nations system to produce relevant policy research *internally*, as a major enabling factor in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?
- What is the optimum balance between *demand-driven research*, dictated by immediate operational needs, and *anticipative research*, which should inform the strategies and visions of the United Nations organizations?
- How *autonomous* should policy research be, in terms of both organizational structures and research agenda-setting, and how should the accountability lines in all institutional configurations be drawn?
- How can the *needs of research for the 2030 Agenda* be defined, clustered and met, around themes and organizational mandates, with the collaboration of all competent organizations?
- What *institutional mixes, partnership forms or co-creation formulas* can overcome the frustrations of both academics and policymakers with the uptake of academic research?
- How to improve the abilities of researchers and research managers to *translate academic research into the policy-making language*?
- How can the *capacity of executive heads and governing bodies to absorb research* be stimulated, so as to have real political traction and influence the normative and operational contexts?
- How can *reporting lines* be improved and decision-makers be motivated to take into account trends and the changes needed, as identified by policy research?

293. Hopefully, the present report will not be used solely by the JIU participating organizations. The review is meant as a contribution to build and consolidate bridges between the entire United Nations system and the academic communities. The responses to the academic survey challenged many stereotypes, including the prejudice that academics tend to be “long on diagnosis and short on solutions”. As a matter of fact, there were more similarities between the views of United Nations practitioners and those of academics than the report could reveal, within its size limit.

294. The best answers to the above set of new questions could be found through enhanced and action-oriented inter-agency dialogue, on the one hand, and by means of a more systematic and targeted interaction between the United Nations system and academia, in the spirit of global partnerships suggested by Goal 17, on the other.

295. Using interdisciplinary and collaborative research as a means to strengthen research uptake is not optional. The complexity of the mandates of the United Nations system and the multiplicity of actors, organizations, governance models, markets, technological developments and other causal factors, which work simultaneously, warrant not only a revision of policy research uptake at the system-wide level, but also a new vision for it.

## Annex I

### List of research guidelines/policies and strategic frameworks

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