



United Nations

Review of decentralized evaluation in the United Nations system organizations

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

Prepared by Eileen A. Cronin



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Abbreviations and acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
OIOS	Office of Internal Oversight Services, United Nations Secretariat
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UN Tourism	World Tourism Organization
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UPU	Universal Postal Union
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

I. Introduction

1. At the request of participating organizations, this review was included in the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) programme of work for 2025. The subject of the review primarily falls under the thematic area of accountability and oversight functions in the JIU strategic framework for 2020–2029.

2. The present review expands on previous JIU work, in particular the most recent JIU review covering the topic, in 2014, entitled “Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system”, in which JIU issued one formal recommendation specifically addressing the decentralized evaluation function.¹

A. Objectives, scope and intended impact

3. As decentralized evaluations have increased across participating organizations over the past decade, it is important to examine whether the resources and effort invested in them are being used efficiently and effectively. Against this background, the review assesses how decentralized evaluation can be strengthened to generate credible, useful and timely evidence, foster a stronger results- and evidence-based culture and enhance organizational learning and accountability. It examines the institutional arrangements, resources, capacities and efficiency of decentralized evaluation as a function, along with the effectiveness, credibility and use of findings and evaluative evidence for accountability and learning. The review covers only evaluative activities meeting the definition of an evaluation as described in the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system.²

4. The review examines the policies and practices of 28 JIU participating organizations from 2021 to 2025. For the United Nations Secretariat, this system-wide review cannot encompass the evaluation practices of all Secretariat entities, numbering more than 70. Six selected entities³ were examined to provide practical insight, while the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) were reviewed separately as JIU participating organizations. The review also covers the state of centralized evaluation, though in less depth, as decentralized evaluation cannot be assessed in isolation. While it examines progress in addressing key gaps identified in the 2014 JIU report, its primary emphasis is on developments since 2021. Given the fluid financial context currently impacting participating organizations, the review also seeks to summarize ongoing and anticipated changes to both centralized and decentralized evaluation functions, ensuring that its findings and recommendations remain relevant at the time of issuance in late 2026.

B. Approach and methodology

5. The review was conducted in accordance with the JIU statute and internal procedures. Consistent with the Unit’s collaborative approach, participating organizations provided input at various stages of the review. To ensure the validity and

¹ JIU/REP/2014/6, recommendation 9 (accepted by 81 per cent of participating organizations, 95 per cent of which reported it as implemented).

² United Nations Evaluation Group, “Norms and standards for evaluation”, 2016. Available at <https://www.unevaluation.org/unevaluation/publications/unevaluation-norms-and-standards-evaluation-un-system>.

³ Development Coordination Office, Economic Commission for Africa, Economic Commission for Europe, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

reliability of the review findings, the Inspector used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods from various sources. The data and evidence underpinning the review were collected between 1 May 2025 and 31 March 2026 using the following tools:

- An extensive **desk review and in-depth comparative analysis** of relevant documentation including evaluation and other relevant policies, annual reports, manuals and guidelines, peer review reports of evaluation functions and sampled decentralized evaluation reports
- A **corporate questionnaire** to collect data on both centralized and decentralized evaluations from all participating organizations
- **110 semi-structured interviews** with 215 individuals, including officials from participating organizations at headquarters, regional and country levels across evaluation, programme, partnerships and senior management functions, as well as donor representatives
- An **online survey of country offices** from 13 participating organizations across 20 countries, drawing on their recent experience with United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), country programme and project evaluations. It received 146 responses, with a satisfactory response rate of about 60 per cent.

6. The main limitation is that most organizations do not systematically track decentralized evaluations, including their numbers, costs or use. This restricted cross-organizational comparisons and made it difficult to gauge their overall scope. Interviews and the survey were used to help address these gaps.

7. The Inspector wishes to express her appreciation to all the officials of JIU participating organizations and other stakeholders, who contributed through interviews, the corporate questionnaire and the survey. Confidentiality of respondents was duly protected.

8. In accordance with article 11 (2) of the JIU statute, the draft report was subjected to an internal peer review by JIU Inspectors for quality assurance and to test the recommendations against the Unit's collective wisdom. The report was finalized after consideration of all comments received, although responsibility for its content rests solely with the author.

9. In fulfilling its professional and ethical obligations, the JIU team was not subject to any external influence that could have affected its independence, fairness, impartiality or professional integrity during the planning, execution and drafting phases of this report.

10. Two outputs were produced: (a) the present report, available in the six official languages of the United Nations; and (b) a supplementary analysis, issued under the symbol [JIU/REP/2026/5 \[Expanded report\]](#), which contains the underlying evidence for this report.

11. The report contains six formal recommendations, of which one is addressed to legislative bodies and five to the executive heads. To facilitate the implementation of the recommendations, the annex contains a table specifying whether each recommendation requires action by a legislative body or by the executive head. In addition to the formal recommendations, 11 informal recommendations, in bold, offer additional suggestions and/or complement the formal recommendations.

II. Centralized and decentralized evaluation functions

12. This section sets out the key definitions and an overview of evaluation activities during the review period, providing the framework for analysis in subsequent sections.

A. Definitions

13. The 28 JIU participating organizations take varied approaches to evaluation and use different terminologies and definitions. As identical terms may carry different meanings across organizations, the following definitions are used for the purposes of this review.

14. “Centralized evaluations” are understood as evaluations that are planned and conducted by a central evaluation office or unit. However, there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a central evaluation office, and such offices vary considerably in size, form and mandate among participating organizations. Based on predominant practices, this report adopts the following working definition:

The central evaluation office or unit is an organizational entity formally established and governed by an evaluation policy or equivalent institutional framework, with a clearly defined mandate and the financial and human resources to conduct evaluations covering any area of the organization. It is distinguished from other organization entities by having evaluation as its primary purpose and may range from a single evaluation officer to a dedicated unit, either established as a stand-alone⁴ entity or embedded within other organizational functions, according to the needs of the organization. Not all central evaluation entities are structurally and/or functionally independent from management.

15. Depending on its mandate, a central evaluation entity may perform one or more of the following roles, among others:

- provide independent assurance and oversight to the governing body or legislative organ (a third line function in the three lines model of the Institute of Internal Auditors)⁵
- generate evaluative evidence to inform senior management decision-making
- support organizational learning and accountability across programmes or functions
- build evaluation capacity and promote a culture of evidence-based decision-making and results-based management within the organization.

16. There is no agreed definition of decentralized evaluation. A commonly used broad definition refers to evaluations conducted by organizational entities other than

⁴ Stand-alone refers to an office or unit that operates on its own, rather than being embedded within another division or office.

⁵ The three lines model of the Institute of Internal Auditors distinguishes between operational management (first line), functions that support, monitor and guide management (second line) and independent assurance functions (third line). While the model was developed primarily for governance, risk management and internal control, it provides a useful analytical framework for considering where decentralized and centralized evaluation functions are positioned within organizational accountability arrangements. The United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, in document CEB/2014/HLCM/14/Rev.1, recommended the adoption of the Institute’s previous framework, the three lines of defence model, adapted to the United Nations system’s risk management, oversight and accountability arrangements.

the central evaluation office or unit.⁶ However, such a definition does not clarify the distinct function and purpose of decentralized evaluations within an organization, nor does it clearly differentiate them from centralized evaluations.

17. From the analysis of policies and practices in conducting decentralized evaluations at participating organizations, the following more comprehensive definition of decentralized evaluation is proposed:⁷

Decentralized evaluations are evaluations planned, financed, commissioned and managed by organizational units outside the central evaluation entity. These units may operate at any level of the organization, including headquarters departments, regional offices, country offices, and programme or project management structures. Unlike the central evaluation entities, these units do not hold an organization-wide evaluation mandate; their scope is limited to their respective areas of responsibility, including, but not limited to, projects, programmes, clusters, themes and inter-agency activities.

Because decentralized evaluations are managed and approved under the authority of line management, they are therefore commissioned and managed by functions that are not structurally and/or administratively independent from the activities, programmes or projects being evaluated. Decentralized evaluations are commonly conducted by external consultants, who are expected to exercise professional independence and impartiality and are subject to the applicable organizational evaluation standards.

Decentralized evaluations form an integral part of an organization's monitoring and evaluation function and ideally should sit within the second line of the Institute of Internal Auditors three lines model. They are primarily intended to support operational learning, managerial and external accountability and evidence generation for programme and project improvement, rather than provide the independent assurance and oversight typically fulfilled by the central evaluation entity at the corporate level.

18. The term “decentralized evaluation” is included in the evaluation policies of 14 organizations (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN-Habitat, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO) and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)). The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the Universal Postal Union (UPU) conduct decentralized evaluations but have no evaluation policy. Several organizations use different terms to refer to evaluation activities that correspond to the above definition of decentralized evaluations, including evaluations conducted under the responsibility of the budget holder, self-evaluations, project-managed evaluations and management-led terminal reviews.

⁶ Including in the most recent United Nations Evaluation Group publication on decentralized evaluations, “Assessment Framework for Decentralized Evaluation Functions in the UN System” (2025).

⁷ JIU holds a different position from that in the United Nations Evaluation Group 2025 publication “Assessment Framework for Decentralized Evaluation Functions in the UN System” regarding the placement of the decentralized evaluation function within the organization.

19. Based on the definitions above, 20 organizations conduct both centralized and decentralized evaluations, 5 conduct only centralized evaluations, 2 conduct only decentralized evaluations and 1 conducts no evaluations at all (see table 1). Among United Nations Secretariat entities, UNSDCF evaluations are classified as decentralized evaluations, and are considered under the United Nations Secretariat because one of its entities, the Development Coordination Office,⁸ provides oversight of them. UNSDCF evaluations are the most formally established type of decentralized evaluation within the United Nations Secretariat.

Table 1

Overview of evaluation function at JIU participating organizations

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Existence of a centralized evaluation unit</i>	<i>Existence of decentralized evaluations</i>
FAO	Yes	Yes
IAEA	Yes	No
ICAO	Yes	Yes ^a
ILO	Yes	Yes
IMO	Yes	No
ITC	Yes	Yes
ITU	Yes ^b	Yes
United Nations Secretariat	Yes ^c	Yes ^d
UNAIDS	Yes	No
UNCTAD	Yes	No
UNDP	Yes	Yes
UNEP	Yes	Yes
UNESCO	Yes	Yes
UNFPA	Yes	Yes
UN-Habitat	Yes	Yes
UNHCR	Yes	Yes
UNICEF	Yes	Yes
UNIDO	Yes	Yes
UNODC	Yes	No
UNOPS	No	Yes
UNRWA	Yes	Yes

⁸ The United Nations Evaluation Group guidelines for the evaluation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2021) indicate that UNSDCF evaluations are decentralized, with oversight and technical support provided by the Development Coordination Office. Available at www.unevaluation.org/uneg_publications/guidelines-evaluation-united-nations-sustainable-development-cooperation.

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Existence of a centralized evaluation unit</i>	<i>Existence of decentralized evaluations</i>
UN Tourism	No	No
UN-Women	Yes	Yes
UPU	No	Yes
WFP	Yes	Yes
WHO	Yes	Yes
WIPO	Yes	Yes
WMO	Yes	Yes
Total	25	22

Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

^a Decentralized evaluation is articulated in policy but has not yet been operationalized.

^b Starting in 2026.

^c Within the United Nations Secretariat, OIOS serves as its internal oversight body, including for evaluations, and the only organization-wide third line evaluation function for the Secretariat. However, many United Nations Secretariat entities, including regional commissions and offices away from Headquarters, have their own evaluation units that are separate from OIOS but do not perform a third line function.

^d This refers solely to UNSDCF evaluations that are coordinated by the Development Coordination Office.

B. Evaluation activities (2021–2025)

20. During the review period, the central evaluation entities of 25 organizations⁹ conducted a total of 1,381 centralized evaluations. Total expenditure for these offices, including personnel, amounted to \$423,725,345, or about 0.19 per cent of organization expenditure.¹⁰ The number of decentralized evaluations, conducted by 22 organizations, is not well tracked: of the 18 organizations with available data, a total of 3,703 decentralized evaluations were completed during the review period, and only 12 organizations¹¹ could provide expenditure data, amounting to \$382,902,998, or about 0.24 per cent of their aggregated organization expenditure.

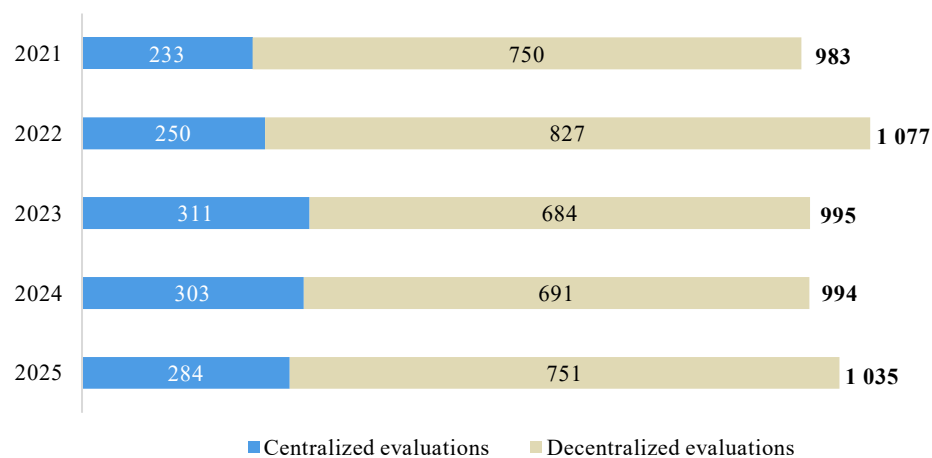
21. Based on known figures, on average, about 1,000 evaluations were conducted per year, with decentralized evaluations consistently outnumbering centralized evaluations by at least two to one. Reported spending on decentralized evaluations appears comparable to centralized spending, but is likely significantly underestimated, as many organizations do not track their expenditure and available data often exclude staff time managing the process. See figures I and II below and the supplementary analysis document (JIU/REP/2026/5 [Expanded report]) for organization-specific data.

⁹ For the United Nations Secretariat, only evaluation reports by OIOS are included.

¹⁰ Based on aggregated expenditures of 22 central evaluation entities between 2021 and 2024. The United Nations Secretariat was excluded from the calculation because the review did not have expenditures for its evaluation entities except OIOS. UNCTAD was also excluded because its organization expenses are not broken down separately from those of the United Nations Secretariat in United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination records. Organization expenses for 2025 are not yet available.

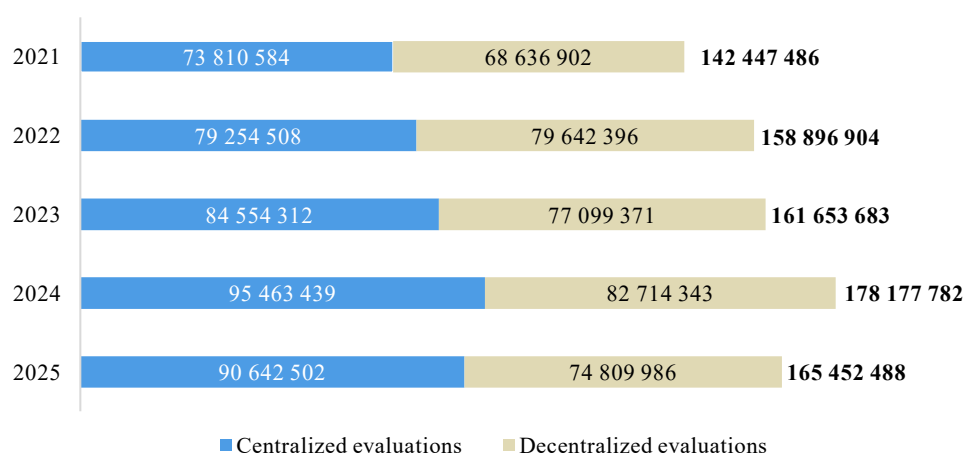
¹¹ ILO, International Trade Centre (ITC), United Nations Secretariat (UNSDCF evaluations), UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN-Women, WFP, WHO, WIPO and World Meteorological Organization (WMO). ICAO and ITU had not yet conducted decentralized evaluations during the review period.

Figure I
Number of evaluations by JIU participating organizations (2021–2025)



Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

Figure II
Evaluation expenditure¹² at JIU participating organizations (2021–2025)
 (United States dollars)



Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

¹² Expenditure amounts for centralized evaluations include both evaluation activities and staffing costs.

III. State of centralized evaluation in the United Nations system organizations

22. Since 2014, the central evaluation entities of JIU participating organizations have evolved considerably. Although this review focuses on decentralized evaluation, central evaluation entities remain key to shaping and supporting the function. As arrangements continue to evolve, the findings here reflect the situation as of early 2026. This section compares current arrangements with the findings of the 2014 JIU review and provides context for the decentralized evaluation analysis.¹³ Data by organization are available in the supplementary analysis document (JIU/REP/2026/5 [Expanded report]).

A. Structural placement of central evaluation entities

23. The structural placement of central evaluation entities remains fluid as organizations continue to adapt the function to changing needs. At the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNCTAD and UNHCR, central evaluation entities once housed within executive management or programme structures are now stand-alone offices. More organizations operate central evaluation entities as a separate unit within internal oversight offices, either to strengthen autonomy within integrated structures (International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), WIPO) or to consolidate former stand-alone offices for cost savings (United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), UN-Women). Among ITU, UNOPS, the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) and UPU, which lacked a central evaluation entity in 2014, only ITU is establishing one. As previously noted,¹⁴ **the Inspector encourages UNOPS and UPU to consider establishing a function to oversee and provide policy guidance on evaluation.**

24. The 2014 JIU review found structural placement guided mainly by independence, efficiency, relevance and utility; recent changes suggest financial considerations now play a greater role. In some cases, restructuring has preceded corresponding updates to evaluation policies. For example, WHO reintegrated its stand-alone evaluation office into the oversight function in 2025, and the formerly stand-alone office of UN-Habitat now reports administratively to the Corporate Management Division.

B. Functional and administrative independence

25. The review assessed the administrative and functional independence of central evaluation entities, applying the same key parameters as the 2014 review. As independence exists along a spectrum, these parameters indicate relative positioning rather than a definitive determination.

26. Functional independence has strengthened, with 15 central evaluation entities now able to determine their evaluation agendas independently from management, up from 11 in 2014. Among the 24 central evaluation entities, all except those of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Trade Centre (ITC) can issue evaluation reports and other outputs without management involvement.¹⁵

¹³ For the United Nations Secretariat, this section refers only to OIOS, as the Secretariat's central evaluation unit.

¹⁴ In document JIU/REP/2017/4, the Inspector encouraged UPU to develop an evaluation policy and a workplan; in JIU/REP/2018/3 it was acknowledged that UNOPS did not have a policy or function for evaluation as its evaluations were administered by partners. However, this is no longer the case.

¹⁵ The UN-Habitat evaluation unit, however, reports that this has not been fully enforced in practice.

27. Governing bodies have also taken on an expanded role in the selection and appointment of heads of evaluation. Eight of the 12 stand-alone central evaluation offices involve their governing body in appointing the head. Of these, WFP is the only organization whose policy states that its Executive Board approves the appointment of the Director of Evaluation. In the other seven – the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Secretariat (Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS)), UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR and UNICEF – such appointments by the executive heads require consultation with the governing body. Overall, however, more organizations now appoint the head of evaluation without governing body input than in 2014. This trend is observed mainly in organizations, including UN-Women and WHO, that have integrated previously stand-alone evaluation offices into broader oversight or other units.

28. Only 10 of the 25 organizations with a central evaluation entity¹⁶ impose both term limits for the head of evaluation and restrictions on re-entry into the organization. **The Inspector reminds organizations that such limitations strengthen the independence of evaluation heads by reducing actual or perceived career incentives that could affect their impartiality.**

29. With respect to administrative independence, 17 central evaluation entities reported having control over management of financial and human resources assigned to them, including selection of staff and consultants and approval of recurrent administrative functions. The remaining seven offices – FAO, ITC, UNAIDS, UNCTAD, UNEP, UN-Habitat and UNHCR – reported limitations in this regard.

C. Resources

30. Since the 2014 JIU review, evaluation policies across the United Nations system have markedly matured in their treatment of resourcing, moving from underresourced functions with unstable, ad hoc financing to formalized budget norms. Nine organizations explicitly reference the 2014 JIU-suggested benchmark of 0.5–3 per cent of organizational expenditure in their policies, and many others have codified their own percentage targets, mostly for both centralized and decentralized evaluations, ranging from higher-end commitments of 2–3 per cent (UNESCO, UN-Women and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)) to mid-range targets of around 1 per cent (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNAIDS and WHO) and lower-range alignments (FAO, UNRWA and WFP). Policies also increasingly distinguish between core funding for central evaluation offices and mandatory evaluation budget lines in extrabudgetary projects, while several organizations (FAO, ILO, UNICEF and WFP) have established pooled or trust funds for varying purposes, such as to create economies of scale, avoid cross-subsidization, and enable thematic, joint and impact evaluations.

31. However, a significant gap persists between policy commitment and implementation. In 2021–2023, most organizations received requested allocations, often below the norm, but from 2024, a growing number reported shortfalls, with frozen or downgraded posts and deep cuts to non-post resources.¹⁷ The system-wide trend is one of proportional decline: average expenditure share for centralized evaluation fell slightly from 0.30 per cent in 2012–2013 to 0.28 per cent in 2023–2024. While 12 organizations saw an increase, reductions were recorded across many entities, including some with previously higher investment levels. Overall, the picture is concerning: stronger norms have not yet translated into predictable funding, leaving the function's sustainability and independence at risk.

¹⁶ In the case of the United Nations Secretariat, this refers to OIOS.

¹⁷ Funding not tied to staff positions.

32. In terms of human resources, central evaluation entities have grown in both size and seniority. Between 2012 and 2025, staffing across 25 participating organizations rose by about 73 per cent from 197.95 to 343.10 full-time personnel. Several organizations recorded substantial growth, including UNDP (24 to 47), UNICEF (17 to 26), UNODC (5 to 11) and WFP (19 to 58), with some also drawing on long-term affiliate personnel.¹⁸ The workforce grew across all professional grades, but general service staffing remained essentially flat in absolute terms even as total staff expanded, meaning its share of the workforce shrank. Early-career staff (P-1–P-3) grew fastest in proportional terms, while mid-to-senior (P-4 and above) and Director-level staff grew more modestly. However, these trends warrant caution, as the number of centralized evaluations produced remained broadly similar despite the staffing increase, and such factors as digital tools, remote data collection and evolving mandates make headcount an imperfect measure of adequacy. Disparities also persist, as UNHCR reports a far lower number of evaluation professionals (12) in 2025 than comparable humanitarian agencies such as UNICEF (21) and WFP (34).

¹⁸ The scope and mandate of centralized evaluation entities vary widely, so comparisons of personnel and budgets should account for such variation.

IV. Institutional framework for decentralized evaluation

33. The 2014 JIU review concluded that most organizations lacked a well-defined institutional framework for decentralized evaluation, leaving the function tenuous. This section examines the progress since 2014 in institutionalizing it as a key organizational function.

A. Institutional positioning of decentralized evaluation

34. Recognition of decentralized evaluation as distinct from centralized evaluation remains uneven across organizations, with many policy frameworks not clearly defining its purpose or institutional status. Both functions ultimately serve learning and accountability, but in different ways, at different levels, for different users. This distinction is foundational to how evaluations are owned, resourced, conducted and used. When clearly articulated, it signals to line managers that decentralized evaluation is part of their own accountability and learning responsibilities, driving ownership and use of findings.

35. Of the 20 organizations conducting both centralized and decentralized evaluations, 13 recognize decentralized evaluation as distinct in ways beyond simply who carries it out, typically by scope, level and intended use: centralized evaluations are positioned as strategic, organization-wide exercises, while decentralized ones focus on operational and programmatic learning, accountability and improvement for line managers. While FAO, ILO, ITU, UNEP, UNICEF and WHO policies distinguish the two structurally or administratively, they do not articulate a differentiated rationale for their respective purposes, intended users or different contributions to organizational learning and accountability, leaving these organizations without a sufficient policy foundation for coherent yet distinct, complementary and well-owned evaluation practices across both functions.

36. Beyond recognizing the distinct value of decentralized evaluation, only UNDP, UNHCR, WFP and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) clearly designate in their accountability or enterprise risk management framework that the commissioning of decentralized evaluations by line management is a second line function. UNIDO treats its decentralized evaluations (termed self-evaluations) as first and second line, since they may be conducted by responsible officials¹⁹ or external consultants. **The Inspector advises participating organizations that have not yet done so to consider placing decentralized evaluation explicitly as a second line function, to make it clear that line management, not the central evaluation office, is primarily responsible for commissioning these evaluations, and to help protect the central evaluation entity's distinct third line role.** Without this distinction, the boundary between the two blurs and the central evaluation office's perceived independence may be compromised.

37. At ILO and UNEP, decentralized evaluations are treated more as a delegated centralized evaluation function. Their central evaluation offices retain final sign-off and can revise reports or return reports to the external evaluators, transferring ownership away from line management. The UNEP arrangement resembles UNODC project evaluations, but UNODC does not classify these as decentralized, a more candid position given that the central evaluation office effectively owns the final product.

¹⁹ Evaluations conducted by their own officials may not meet the United Nations Evaluation Group definition of an evaluation.

B. Normative custodian of decentralized evaluation

38. A clearly designated normative custodian of decentralized evaluation is essential for consistent standards, quality, oversight and accountability across all evaluations, regardless of which unit commissions them. The custodian should hold organizational responsibility for institutional arrangements and standards of the function, setting norms, supporting quality through capacity development and quality assurance and overseeing coverage and use, without managing individual evaluations. Ideally, the normative custodian enables and safeguards the function, balancing organizational standards with the ownership and autonomy needed to make decentralized evaluation a genuine line management tool rather than a compliance exercise.

39. Among the organizations reviewed, 12 designate their central evaluation entity as custodian of the overall evaluation function in their evaluation policies, implying custodianship of both centralized and decentralized evaluations. Only three make normative custodianship of the decentralized evaluation function explicit (UN-Habitat, UNRWA and UN-Women). At ILO, the evaluation office's custodianship is narrower, covering decentralized evaluations only when they are mandatory.

40. UNDP and UNICEF adopt a shared accountability model reflecting a whole-of-organization approach. At UNDP, responsibility is distributed between the central evaluation office, which retains normative authority for evaluation standards and quality assessment, and the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, which is accountable for promoting decentralized evaluation quality, strengthening evaluation capacity in decentralized offices and monitoring relevant corporate indicators. At UNICEF, the evaluation office retains normative responsibility for evaluation policy, standards and quality assessment, while division directors, regional directors and country office representatives hold defined managerial accountabilities for resourcing, staffing, implementation and use of decentralized evaluations. While shared models can broaden ownership, they require particularly clear delineation of roles and responsibilities to avoid accountability gaps.

41. Six organizations (FAO, ITU, UNIDO, UNOPS, UPU, WIPO) do not clearly designate a normative custodian for decentralized evaluations. The Inspector points to a risk that, without a designated custodian to set standards, ensure quality and monitor coverage and use, the coherence and credibility of the decentralized evaluation function is difficult to sustain.

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

Recommendation 1

By the end of 2027, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should review their policies to include: (a) a clear definition of decentralized evaluation within their accountability frameworks; (b) the designation of a normative custodian of decentralized evaluations; and (c) a delineation of the roles and responsibilities for all key phases of decentralized evaluations.

C. Institutional arrangements in conducting decentralized evaluations

43. Policy frameworks across participating organizations generally present decentralized evaluation as operationally decentralized, with commissioning units responsible for planning, budgeting, managing and using evaluations. In practice,

however, the degree to which central evaluation entities participate in the decentralized evaluation process varies.

44. Three broad configurations emerge. At ICAO, ILO, ITC, ITU and UNEP, central evaluation entities are mandatorily involved at key points throughout the process, notably approval of workplans, terms of reference and finalization of evaluation reports, with ILO describing its approach as hybrid decentralized evaluation, given this heavy involvement. For three organizations, the role of the central evaluation entity is confined to specific stages. At FAO, donor compliance requirements drive front-end review of workplans and terms of reference by the evaluation office and, for UNSDCF evaluations, the Development Coordination Office of the United Nations Secretariat reviews and approves terms of reference as per its guidance.²⁰ At UNHCR, the central evaluation entity must clear final reports before publication. In the remaining organizations, responsibility rests fully with commissioning units, with central evaluation offices playing advisory roles focused on guidance, capacity development and quality assurance. Table 2 summarizes the level of involvement of central evaluation entities in the decentralized evaluation process.

Table 2

Institutional arrangements for the decentralized evaluation process in JIU participating organizations

<i>Model</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Organization</i>
Decentralized evaluations with requirements for clearance by the central evaluation office or unit	Commissioning units manage decentralized evaluations but hold no independent decision-making authority at most or all key stages of the cycle	ICAO, ILO, ITC, ITU, UNEP (5)
Central control at front end	Planning and/or design of decentralized evaluations requires approval from the central evaluation office or unit; subsequent stages are decentralized	FAO, United Nations Secretariat (Development Coordination Office) (2)
Central control at final output stage	Final decentralized report requires clearance or approval by the central evaluation office or unit before publication; preceding stages are decentralized	UNHCR (1)
Fully operationally decentralized	Commissioning units have full authority over all stages of the decentralized evaluation cycle	UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN Habitat, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNOPS, UNRWA, UN-Women, UPU, WFP, WHO, WIPO, WMO (14)

Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

45. Organizations also differ as to where the ownership of evaluation capacity resides. Among the 10 organizations with significant field presence, evaluation capacity has been established at the regional level, closer to where most decentralized evaluations are conducted, but with two distinct ownership patterns (see table 3). In the first group (ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO), regional technical capacity

²⁰ See United Nations Evaluation Group guidelines for the evaluation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2021).

for decentralized evaluations is wholly or largely owned by the regional offices, with UNICEF also having evaluation capacity at the country level: they fund and direct their own evaluation personnel, with the central evaluation offices limited to setting norms, developing guidance and building overall organizational evaluation capacity. This supports genuine ownership of the function by line management.²¹ In the second group (FAO, UNESCO, UNHCR, UN-Women, WFP) regional evaluation capacity continues to be provided by the central evaluation entity, which deploys its own personnel to the regions.

Table 3

Human resources with evaluation expertise at the regional and country level, 2025

Organization	Position	Role and time dedicated to decentralized evaluation-related activities	Reporting line		
			Central evaluation office	Regional office	Country office
FAO	Evaluation officers (outposted to regions)	15–20 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping as needed	Yes	No	No
ILO	Regional evaluation specialists	Full-time dedicated to technical backstopping	Secondary	Yes	No
UNDP	Regional evaluation advisers	20–40 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping, mainly to regional monitoring and evaluation focal points	Yes	No	No
	Regional monitoring and evaluation/results-based management/evaluation officers	20–40 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping and capacity development for country offices	No	Yes	No
UNESCO	Regional evaluation officers	Full-time dedicated to technical backstopping or management of decentralized evaluations	Yes	Secondary	No
UNFPA	Regional planning, monitoring and evaluation advisers	20 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping	Secondary	Yes	No
UNHCR	Senior regional evaluation officers	50 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping	Yes (Secondary until 2024)	Secondary (Yes until 2024)	No
UNICEF	Regional evaluation advisers	Full-time dedicated to technical backstopping, mainly of country-level evaluation officers and monitoring and evaluation focal points	Secondary	Yes	No
	Multi-country evaluation specialists, (country-level) evaluation officers	Full-time dedicated to technical backstopping and management of decentralized evaluations	No	Secondary	Yes

²¹ ILO is a partial exception since its central evaluation office still controls the decentralized evaluation cycle and the appointment and management of the regional evaluation officers, so regional ownership of evaluation staff has not translated into full decentralized ownership of the function.

Organization	Position	Role and time dedicated to decentralized evaluation-related activities	Reporting line		
			Central evaluation office	Regional office	Country office
UN-Women	Regional evaluation specialists	20 per cent of time dedicated to technical backstopping	Yes	No	No
WFP	Regional evaluation officers	Full-time	Yes ^a	No	No
WHO	Evaluation/planning/technical officers	25–100 per cent of time dedicated to either technical backstopping or management of decentralized evaluations	No	Yes	No

Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

^a Up until 2025, most regional evaluation officers reported to the respective regional offices.

46. When evaluation capacity is owned outside the central evaluation entity, this reflects a more mature decentralized evaluation function. Achieving and sustaining this depends on central norms and guidance, field-based technical support and policy-backed investment in capacity, underpinned by a policy framework that clarifies roles, quality standards, support arrangements, staffing and funding commitments, training and mechanisms that promote the use of findings. This maturity reflects sustained institutional attention, including investments in strengthening results-based management, evaluation culture, and monitoring and evaluation capacity, permitting central evaluation offices to shift toward an enabling role. This is clearest in UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA, where most regional and country offices invest in and sustain their own evaluation capacity, signalling that the function has become genuinely decentralized.

47. In organizations where central evaluation entities remain involved in individual decentralized evaluations, interviewees from central evaluation entities frame this as risk management, responding to uneven capacity of units commissioning decentralized evaluations, variable quality, reputational exposure and donor demands, rather than as reflecting differing interpretations of decentralization. Full ownership of the decentralized evaluation cycle by commissioning units is considered feasible only where adequate management capacity, reliable monitoring systems and an established evaluation and results-based management culture exist. At the same time, interviewees acknowledge that even a limited role played by central evaluation entities can diminish commissioning units' sense of ownership over, and of the purpose and utility of, decentralized evaluations.

48. These findings carry clear implications for how decentralized evaluation should evolve. The Inspector underlines that closer central support is appropriate where evaluation culture and capacity is nascent, but that such support should serve to develop capacity rather than exert control. The goal should be progressive transition towards genuine autonomy as maturity grows, so that decentralized evaluation becomes an internalized line management tool, not a centrally administered requirement. Organizations where central evaluation entities remain involved in key decentralized evaluation steps should articulate a clear pathway for stepping back from such operational roles and repositioning them as normative custodians of standards and quality. This would preserve the central evaluation office's third line assurance role while letting decentralized evaluation mature as a fully established second line function.

49. The following recommendation aims to improve coordination, strengthen the capacity of the second line to manage decentralized evaluations, and better define the roles and responsibilities of central evaluation entities.

Recommendation 2

By the end of 2028, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should develop an approach for strengthening decentralized evaluation as a mature second line function, encompassing governance arrangements, quality standards, dedicated resourcing, guidance materials and capacity-building measures.

V. Implementation of decentralized evaluations

A. Demands and drivers of decentralized evaluations

50. Decentralized evaluations are typically commissioned for three distinct, sometimes overlapping, reasons: (a) policy coverage norms; (b) donor requirements; and (c) the commissioning unit's own management needs, such as accountability, learning and course corrections. In practice, policy coverage norms in several organizations trigger evaluations first, and, where donor requirements are also met, this is not reported separately, meaning that donor-driven figures likely understate their true share. Among the 12 organizations that track reasons for the commissioning of decentralized evaluations, about 82 per cent of their decentralized evaluations were driven by policy coverage norms and 24 per cent by donor requirements, with some driven by both. All or nearly all decentralized evaluations at ILO, UNESCO, UNFPA and UNHCR were policy-mandated, as are all UNSDCF evaluations. Though data were incomplete, interviews and survey responses confirm that decentralized evaluations were predominantly driven by imposed requirements.

51. Mandatory minimum requirements for decentralized evaluations vary considerably across organizations and are distinct from donor-mandated evaluations, which are assumed compulsory throughout. For project evaluations, requirements generally fall into six categories, which are not always mutually exclusive and can appear in combination: (a) budget thresholds, the most common category, sometimes tiered so that higher budgets trigger a different form or number of evaluations (e.g. ILO, ICAO, UNRWA, UNDP); (b) frequency-based norms tied to programme cycles, office size or emergency type (e.g. UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, UN-Women); (c) a default "evaluate all" approach for projects not otherwise selected for centralized evaluation (e.g. UNIDO); (d) criteria-based selection, where projects are chosen against factors such as strategic importance, donor requirements or geographical coverage (e.g. UNEP, WHO); (e) governance- or mandate-based triggers stemming from governing body decisions (e.g. WIPO); and (f) advisory or no formal requirements, where decentralized evaluation is encouraged but not mandated (e.g. WMO) or where no evaluation policy yet exists (e.g. UNOPS, UPU, ITU). For country programme evaluations, requirements align with programme cycles and are either conducted as centralized evaluations (e.g. FAO, ILO, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, UN-Women, WFP) or as decentralized evaluations, with some organizations allowing flexibility for either modality depending on context (e.g. UNDP, WHO), while others set a fixed frequency such as once per programme cycle or once every two cycles (e.g. UNFPA, UNICEF) or mandate them systematically across all country-level frameworks (e.g. UNSDCF evaluations).

52. Desk review and donor interviews reveal significant differences in donor evaluation requirements. Not all reviewed donors providing tightly earmarked funding require recipient evaluations. Requirements are most common among certain governmental donors (e.g., Germany, the Republic of Korea, Sweden and, in some cases, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and vertical funds such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund. By contrast, philanthropic foundations and the European Commission generally do not require recipient evaluations, relying instead on their own evaluation functions. Overall, demand for decentralized evaluations appears largely independent of donor requirements. Vertical funds impose the strictest requirements, while foundations tend to rely on monitoring data and their own evaluations.

53. These findings raise the crucial question of whether organizational evaluation policies have been shaped by donor requirements that are limited in scope or not explicitly defined. The evidence points to a pattern in which some United Nations

system organizations may have evaluation requirements and associated scope that extend beyond what donors request or intend to use. While such requirements may reflect legitimate organizational objectives related to accountability, governance and institutional learning, the findings suggest the importance of examining whether their scope and resource implications is proportionate to stakeholder needs and expected added value. **The Inspector therefore invites participating organizations to review policy triggers for decentralized evaluations linked to donor funding agreements, ensuring that they are fit for purpose and based on actual donor requirements rather than assumed expectations.**

54. Self-initiated decentralized evaluations remain uncommon. Where demand for them exists, they are often constrained by competing priorities, limited evaluation capacity and insufficient budgets. When undertaken, they are typically motivated by their value for decision-making and learning, documentation of good practices, strategic alignment and the addressing of evidence gaps. However, without clear incentives or requirements, line managers often prioritize implementation over evaluation, particularly in humanitarian settings where funding constraints and operational pressures are greatest, so voluntary decentralized evaluations are frequently deprioritized. This pattern is not universal: stronger leadership engagement and perceived usefulness of findings tend to increase ownership and reduce resistance. Overall, however, decentralized evaluation remains largely requirement-driven, reflecting a weak evaluation culture in which decentralized evaluations are conducted because they are expected or required rather than prioritized as a management tool.

B. Credibility of decentralized evaluations

55. Evaluation credibility, a key determinant of whether findings are used and recommendations acted upon, rests on two fundamental factors: independence and quality. The 2014 JIU review found that the credibility of decentralized evaluations had improved; impartiality had progressed as a result of various measures, even as the function remained structurally non-independent of line management by design; and report quality had improved but remained below expected standards.

1. Independence aspects in decentralized evaluation

56. While structural and administrative independence is neither expected nor practical for decentralized evaluations, several organizations have established mechanisms to promote behavioural independence and impartiality. Their effectiveness, however, varies considerably: conflicts of interest, seniority gaps and informal pressures remain concerns in some organizations, while safeguards are still limited in others.

57. Decentralized evaluation managers play a crucial role in promoting evaluation independence. In most organizations, the role is assigned to the manager responsible for the intervention and/or monitoring and evaluation personnel. ICAO, ILO, UNDP, UNHCR and WFP require evaluation managers to have no involvement in the intervention under review, and UNHCR also requires a minimum level of seniority to help resist managerial pressures. UNICEF goes further by maintaining dedicated country- and regional-level evaluation officers to manage decentralized evaluations in most regions (see table 4).

Table 4
Typical managers of decentralized evaluations

<i>Decentralized evaluation manager</i>	<i>Organization</i>
Managers of projects or programmes being evaluated	FAO, ITC, ITU, UNEP, UNESCO, UN-Habitat, UNIDO, UNOPS, UN-Women, UPU, WIPO, WMO (12)
Either monitoring and evaluation personnel or focal points from the project or programme being evaluated	UNFPA, UNRWA (2)
Personnel with no link to the projects or programmes being evaluated	ICAO, ILO, UNDP, UNHCR, WFP (5)
Dedicated regional or country-level decentralized evaluation personnel	UNICEF ²² (1)
Other arrangements or mixed	United Nations Secretariat (for UNSDCF evaluations), WHO (2)

Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

58. Over the past decade, most organizations have issued guidance for evaluation managers and some, including ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN-Women, WFP and WHO, have strengthened capacity through training and communities of practice. Despite these efforts, surveys and interviews indicate persistent capacity constraints. Evaluation management is often assigned as a secondary responsibility, limiting time for evaluation processes. Survey respondents reported gaps in technical expertise, particularly in evaluation design and quality assurance, and expressed strong demand for further training and guidance. These weaknesses may reduce understanding of evaluation norms and standards related to independence and limit support to external evaluators.

59. Using external consultants free from conflicts of interest is a cornerstone of promoting independence for decentralized evaluations. Most organizations prohibit evaluators from having prior involvement in the intervention under evaluation and apply measures such as conflict-of-interest screening, codes of conduct and complaint mechanisms. Interviews with central evaluation entities suggest that overt pressure on evaluators is rare. More common are subtle risks, particularly in small countries where the pool of qualified consultants is limited, making prior connections difficult to avoid. Consultants may also moderate findings to preserve professional relationships and future opportunities, a risk that is difficult to detect or address through formal policies.

60. Interviewees highlighted safeguards such as escalation to regional or central evaluation entities, oversight by regional or central evaluation offices, and capacity development for evaluation managers. However, their effectiveness varies and often depends on informal practices rather than consistent safeguards. By contrast, 96 per cent of surveyed country offices considered themselves effective in protecting evaluators from undue influence, citing measures such as reference groups and separation of evaluation management from programme implementation. This points to a gap between perceived and experienced independence, with regional and central evaluation offices identifying subtler forms of influence linked to reporting lines, seniority and organizational culture.

²² But not in all regions.

61. For decentralized evaluations required under funding agreements, most donors leave independence arrangements to organizations and generally do not require structural independence, except in the case of some vertical funds. GEF, for example, requires evaluations to be independent of policymaking, implementation support, midterm reviews and programme management. For GEF implementing agencies (FAO, UNDP, UNEP and UNIDO), this entails organizational, operational and behavioural independence, supported by conflict-of-interest safeguards, separation of operational and evaluation functions, and contractual protection for evaluators. Although programme or project staff may manage evaluations, involvement of the organization's central evaluation unit in quality control can be perceived by donors as strengthening the independence of the process.

62. Taken together, the findings suggest that decentralized evaluations should always be subject to some form of oversight to safeguard independence, whether through an evaluation reference group, support from a regional or central evaluation office, or similar arrangements. The review identified five organizations lacking such mechanisms. **The Inspector encourages UNIDO, UNOPS, UPU, WIPO and WMO to establish minimum safeguards to ensure the behavioural independence of decentralized evaluations.** Additional measures should be proportionate to risk and tailored to the purpose of the evaluation. Unnecessary safeguards add little value and may divert limited resources from higher-priority needs.

2. Quality of decentralized evaluations

63. Evidence from this review confirms that the availability and competency of external evaluators remain critical to decentralized evaluation quality. Although the volume of evaluations has increased significantly since 2014, organizations continue to face shortages of qualified evaluators, particularly those with local language skills and contextual knowledge. The challenge has shifted from an underdeveloped evaluation function to one constrained by limited availability of qualified external evaluators. As in 2014, the findings point to the need for system-wide rather than organization-specific solutions. **The Inspector recommends that participating organizations develop long-term capacity development plans for external evaluators, particularly national evaluation capacity, preferably through an inter-agency forum such as the United Nations Evaluation Group.**

64. Evaluation quality remains constrained by inadequate theories of change and insufficient high-quality monitoring data, echoing the 2014 review findings. Of 71 sampled evaluations, 75 per cent cited inadequate monitoring and evaluation data and/or weak project design as limitations to the evaluation and/or as major issues requiring recommendations. In many cases, evaluations were used to compensate for gaps in monitoring data. Improving evaluation quality therefore requires stronger project and programme design and better-resourced monitoring systems; where these conditions are absent, organizations should assess whether an evaluation is justified. **The Inspector urges organizations to ensure that projects and programmes are grounded in results-based management principles, supported by adequately resourced monitoring frameworks and evaluated only when they are sufficiently evaluable.**

65. Decentralized evaluation quality is also constrained by limited management capacity, unclear roles and insufficient staff time. Although roles have become more formalized since 2014, evaluation management is still often assigned to project and programme staff without dedicated time, expertise or both. This was reflected in survey results, with 42 per cent of offices citing limited time and 19 per cent identifying insufficient evaluation expertise as key constraints. By contrast, UNESCO reported that the introduction of regional evaluation officers to support evaluation managers has significantly improved the quality of decentralized evaluations, demonstrating the value of dedicated capacity support.

66. Quality assurance systems have improved substantially since 2014. Eleven of the 22 organizations with decentralized evaluation functions now conduct formal formative quality control and/or ex-post quality assessment and track quality ratings, with broad coverage and positive perceptions of effectiveness. Common weaknesses in evaluation quality found through these quality assurance activities include limited integration of gender and human rights, methodological shortcomings, poor data quality and findings or recommendations that lack sufficient evidence or specificity. In 2025, the share of decentralized evaluations rated satisfactory or above ranged from 57 per cent at UNDP to 95 per cent at UN-Women.²³ A quality assurance system remains the most effective lever for improving decentralized evaluation quality, though its impact is limited by uneven adoption and inconsistent monitoring across organizations.

67. Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted quality assurance offers potential efficiency gains and more consistent quality ratings, but differing standards and rating systems risk creating fragmented solutions. One promising example is the AI Quality Assessment for Decentralized Evaluations app developed by the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office in 2025 and also tested by FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. For such tools to support system-wide harmonization, organizations would need to agree on core elements of a common quality assurance framework for their evaluations. **Participating organizations, through the United Nations Evaluation Group, should therefore identify baseline requirements for a common quality assurance framework that could support AI-assisted quality assurance.**

68. Overall, several organizations still lack formal quality standards and assurance mechanisms, yet opportunities remain to harmonize and streamline existing approaches among organizations to reduce duplication and generate economies of scale, especially through the use of digital tools. The following recommendation is intended to strengthen evaluation quality and system-wide coordination.

Recommendation 3

By the end of 2028, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should operationalize quality standards and assurance mechanisms for decentralized evaluations.

C. Use and utility of decentralized evaluations

69. The value of evaluation lies not only in the quality and relevance of the evidence it generates, but ultimately in its utilization. However, data on the actual impact of decentralized evaluations on operational or programmatic effectiveness and efficiency remain limited. Assessments of use therefore rely largely on proxies and perception-based data. One such proxy is the extent to which the minimum infrastructure needed to promote and understand the use of evaluations, comprising a chain of actions ranging from public disclosure to management response to tracked implementation, is in place. The review found that most organizations have established some elements of this chain, but few have implemented it fully and consistently.

²³ Because organizations apply different quality assurance rating mechanisms, their ratings are not directly comparable.

70. Fifteen of the 22 organizations require public disclosure of all decentralized evaluations, recognizing their value for transparency, accountability and learning, while seven publish only some reports or none. In some cases, this reflects legitimate constraints, such as sensitive content or mandate-specific considerations, that can apply even where disclosure is otherwise required, though the norm remains that evaluations should be disclosed. Sixteen organizations require management responses to all decentralized evaluations, helping translate recommendations into organizational commitments, while six do not. Only 10 track implementation of recommendations. In total, nine organizations have all three mechanisms in place, providing a stronger institutional foundation for evaluation follow-up and use (see table 5).

Table 5

Policies and practices in public disclosure, requirement for management response and tracking of implementation of recommendations²⁴

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Public disclosure of all decentralized evaluation reports</i>	<i>Requirement for management response</i>	<i>Centralized tracking of implementation of recommendations</i>
FAO	No formal policy; some reports were published	Yes	No
ICAO	Yes	Yes	Yes
ILO	Yes	Yes	Yes
ITC ^a	Yes	Yes	Yes
ITU	No, all reports remain internal	No	No
United Nations Secretariat (UNSDCF evaluations)	Yes	Yes	No
UNDP	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNEP	Yes	Yes	No
UNESCO	Yes (the policy has not been consistently applied)	Yes	No
UNFPA	Yes	Yes	Yes (by the Programme Division)
UN-Habitat	Yes (only the reports that meet the prescribed evaluation standards)	Yes	No
UNHCR	Yes	Yes	No
UNICEF	Yes ^b	Yes	Yes
UNIDO	No, all reports remain internal	No	No
UNOPS	Some, subject to agreements with donors and/or Governments	No	No

²⁴ May not be applicable to joint evaluations.

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Public disclosure of all decentralized evaluation reports</i>	<i>Requirement for management response</i>	<i>Centralized tracking of implementation of recommendations</i>
UNRWA	Some, subject to management approval	Yes	Yes
UN-Women	Yes	Yes	Yes
UPU	No, all reports remain internal	No	No
WFP	Yes	Yes	Yes
WHO	Yes	Yes	Yes
WIPO	Yes	No	No
WMO	No, all reports remain internal	No	No

Source: JIU corporate questionnaire.

^a Starting in 2026, following the revision of its evaluation policy.

^b Except for sensitive reports.

71. The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance utility and effectiveness of decentralized evaluations.

Recommendation 4

By the end of 2028, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that all decentralized evaluation reports are publicly disclosed to the extent possible, that management responses are required and that implementation of recommendations is systematically tracked, so that evaluations can fully serve as instruments of accountability, learning and organizational improvement.

72. Because decentralized evaluations are largely driven by mandatory requirements rather than intrinsic demand, engagement with their findings tends to be weaker and their use more mechanical, confined to acting on recommendations rather than drawing wider lessons. This requirement-driven logic can also distort which interventions get evaluated: where evaluations are triggered mainly by financial thresholds, smaller interventions that could generate crucial learning may go unexamined. Even so, interview and survey data point to conceptual and strategic uses such as cross-programme learning, informing strategy and funding priorities, and strengthening organizational systems, though these benefits are not systematic and depend heavily on enabling conditions such as leadership, culture, systems and incentives.

73. This mixed picture was evident across organizations. Survey and interview respondents self-reported moderate-to-high use of decentralized evaluations, particularly for programme design, country strategies, adaptive management and midterm adjustments. Among country office respondents, 77 per cent reported high or moderate use, while 42 per cent said findings routinely informed decisions, planning and reporting. However, evidence of actual use was limited, with few comprehensive studies, and interviewees at headquarters and regional offices were more critical, noting that evaluations were often produced but not substantively used, with use sometimes limited to compliance and reporting.

74. Use also varied substantially by context. The UNICEF 2025 Study of Influential Evaluations²⁵ found that formal quality ratings alone were not statistically associated with influence; influence was shaped by a wider combination of leadership, culture, stakeholder engagement, operational capacity, timing and the actionability of recommendations.

75. Interview and survey evidence identified uneven quality, weak knowledge-sharing, limited follow-up and poor alignment with project cycles as barriers to use. Terminal evaluations were often seen as less useful than midterm or strategically timed evaluations because they are commonly completed after project closure. This issue is compounded by the fact that terminal evaluations are usually mandatory, whereas midterm evaluations are often optional. Overall, evaluation use was more likely where leadership demand, stakeholder engagement, institutional follow-up and timely, actionable findings were present.

76. This pattern of evaluation use also applies to donors. With the exception of vertical funds that aggregate evaluation findings, most donors reviewed that require evaluations neither monitor recommendation implementation nor provide feedback on findings, leaving it unclear how they use the evaluations produced by United Nations entities. In interviews, donors also indicated a preference for their own evaluations over those conducted by recipients. Together, these findings raise questions about the value of some donor-mandated evaluations beyond their role as an additional assurance mechanism.

D. Efficiency in conducting decentralized evaluations

77. Decentralized evaluations lose value when they do not serve organizational learning, management or accountability needs: cost savings matter little if findings go unused. Evaluations are considered worthwhile when well-scoped, timely and backed by senior management; perceived utility declines when they are driven predominantly by compliance or donor requirements. Terminal project evaluations illustrate this problem, as findings are rarely acted upon once projects close; yet these are typically mandatory, whereas midterm evaluations, perceived as more useful, are often optional and consequently not always funded. Generic evaluation findings and recommendations exacerbate the problem by adding little value. They reflect weaknesses in evaluation quality and affect efficiency, as resources invested in evaluations that produce generic conclusions generate limited returns and often leave commissioning units with the impression that their resources have been poorly used. Unclear donor requirements add further pressure, pushing offices toward investing in full-scope evaluations by default rather than more proportionate options. **The Inspector advises deeper engagement with donors, including through inter-agency forums at headquarters and country levels, and early involvement of central evaluation entities when donor requirements are unlikely to generate timely or useful evidence.**

78. Survey respondents favoured more flexible, proportionate approaches: over half of surveyed offices considered lighter tools (reviews, self-assessments, monitoring and evaluation reports, real-time evaluations, etc.) to be sufficient in some contexts, reserving full-scope evaluations for cases where risk, scale or accountability needs justify them. The distinction by WFP between different evidence-generation products is a useful practice. Efficiency is also affected by institutional arrangements: weak coordination within and across organizations contributes to duplication, poor timing and missed synergies, while the growing volume of evaluations raises concerns that

²⁵ UNICEF Evaluation Office “The 2025 Study of Influential Evaluations” (New York, UNICEF, 2025).

quantity may be outpacing utility. **The Inspector encourages greater use of alternative evaluative products where feasible, taking into account cost, utility and timeliness.**

79. Clustered, portfolio and thematic evaluations are increasingly recognized as more efficient approaches that can reduce evaluation fatigue and generate strategic learning. However, uptake remains limited as evaluation planning and funding are typically tied to individual projects and donor requirements, particularly for vertical funds, where mandatory project evaluations drive volume and timing. Limited monitoring and evaluation capacity, compliance requirements and coordination demands further constrain uptake.

80. Joint and inter-agency evaluations offer similar potential benefits but remain largely confined to jointly implemented projects. Broader inter-agency thematic and portfolio evaluations are rare due to differences in budgeting, contracting, approval processes and quality standards, as well as the higher coordination costs they entail. As with clustered evaluations, efficiency gains depend on early planning, strong leadership and sustained inter-agency commitment.

81. Similar challenges affect alignment between UNSDCF and country programme evaluations. Although some cases²⁶ demonstrate the benefits of early coordination and shared data collection, these remain uncommon. Misaligned timing, differing classifications, organization-specific requirements and distinct accountability purposes often result in parallel evaluations that repeatedly engage the same stakeholders, increasing costs and evaluation fatigue.

82. Delays remain a recurring challenge, driven by administrative constraints, limited capacity, procurement bottlenecks and difficulties recruiting qualified evaluators. Organizations have introduced mitigation measures, including evaluator rosters, framework agreements, standardized guidance, quality assurance mechanisms and digital tracking systems, but these are unevenly applied. Lasting improvements require earlier integration of evaluations into programme cycles, stronger capacity and more systematic use of available tools. A more fundamental challenge is the limited understanding of decentralized evaluation costs. While consultant fees are often tracked, broader costs, including staff time, management effort and follow-up on recommendations, are rarely captured. This limits organizations' ability to assess efficiency and make evidence-based decisions about evaluation volume and design. **The Inspector strongly advises organizations to collect cost data for completed decentralized evaluations, recognizing that even approximate estimates would support better resource allocation and planning.**

83. The use of AI is beginning to generate efficiency gains, although evidence remains limited. Reported benefits are concentrated in data processing, analysis, evidence retrieval, quality assurance and drafting, particularly where tools are purpose-built, institutionalized and supported by trained staff. However, savings are partly offset by training, development and validation costs. Human oversight and source verification remain essential, with AI proving most effective as a first-stage support tool.

²⁶ Such as the UNSDCF and country programme evaluations of UNFPA, UNICEF and UN-Women in Timor-Leste for the 2021–2025 programming cycle.

VI. Future outlook for decentralized evaluation

84. Over the past decade, evaluation functions across the United Nations system have been strengthened through stronger policies, clearer governance frameworks and greater institutional recognition. Yet this progress has created a growing tension. In decentralized evaluation, the focus of this review, expansion has been driven largely by coverage norms and donor expectations rather than by intrinsic demand for evaluative evidence, increasing the number of evaluations in offices already facing competing priorities and shrinking resources. Many evaluations are neither aligned with the most pressing evidence needs nor designed to be proportionate and fit for purpose, creating inefficiencies where resources are most constrained. This challenge has intensified as earmarked funding has strengthened donor influence over evaluation demand, while coverage norms have tied evaluation requirements to funding thresholds and other criteria rather than strategic evidence needs. The result is a paradox: the system is producing more evaluations, yet many do not address the questions that organizations most need answered, and even when relevant evidence is generated, the capacity to use it is often limited.

85. These challenges come at a time of mounting pressure on the United Nations system. Declining confidence in multilateral institutions is raising expectations that the United Nations demonstrate relevance and results, making evaluation more important than ever. At the same time, AI is reshaping evaluation by improving the speed and scale of evidence collection, analysis, synthesis and reporting, while still requiring human oversight to ensure rigour and credibility. Evaluation is also increasingly recognized as a source of public good that can inform learning and decision-making beyond individual organizations.

86. Taken together, these trends suggest that the current model of decentralized evaluation is no longer fully fit for purpose and that simply producing more evaluations is not a meaningful indicator of a strong function. There is no optimal number of decentralized evaluations or level of spending; evaluations are justified only when their value warrants the resources invested. This requires ensuring that evaluations are relevant, proportionate and supported by efficient institutional arrangements. Efficiency is therefore inseparable from utility. Evaluations driven by financial thresholds or other policy requirements, not only those required by donors, should be periodically assessed for their usefulness. Such reviews should also consider whether alternative products or approaches, including assessments, studies, reviews, or limited-scope, thematic, joint or clustered evaluations, could generate more relevant evidence more efficiently. Refocusing decentralized evaluation on genuine evidence needs and applying it purposefully and proportionately is essential to maintaining its credibility, sustainability and contribution to organizational effectiveness and efficiency.²⁷

87. The following recommendations aim to ensure that decentralized evaluation remains responsive to evolving needs for participating organizations to conduct periodic utility assessments and revisit coverage norms. Evaluations may not be the right tool for every occasion, and in some cases, other evaluative exercises that are more cost-effective and tailored to the evidence need may be better suited. Governing bodies should therefore be aware of the full range of accountability and evidence-generating options available to participating organizations.

²⁷ For further analysis, see the supplementary analysis document ([JIU/REP/2026/5 \[Expanded report\]](#)), sect. S29. Future outlook for decentralized evaluation.

Recommendation 5

By the end of 2029, executive heads of participating organizations should commission an assessment, through an appropriate existing or dedicated mechanism, of the utility and efficiency of decentralized evaluations, including those driven by policy requirements, to revisit coverage norms, identify where alternative and more cost-effective evaluative or other exercises may be better suited, and inform strategies, resource allocation and institutional arrangements.

Recommendation 6

By the end of 2030, governing/legislative bodies of United Nations system organizations should request an update on the assessment of the utility and efficiency of decentralized evaluations, including their drivers, numbers and costs, and an approach for strengthening the function.

Annex

Overview of actions to be taken by participating organizations on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit

		Intended impact	Participating organizations of the Joint Inspection Unit																											
			United Nations ^a	UNAIDS	UNCTAD	ITC	UNDP	UNEP	UNFPA	UN-Habitat	UNHCR	UNICEF	UNODC	UNOPS	UNRWA	UN-Women	WFP	FAO	IAEA	ICAO	ILO	IMO	ITU	UNESCO	UNIDO	UN Tourism	UPU	WHO	WIPO	WMO
Report	For action		☒	☐	☐	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒	☒	☒	☒
	For information		☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐
Recommendation 1	a				E		E	E	E		E		E	E	E		E		E	E		E	E	E		E	E	E		
Recommendation 2	a				E		E		E	E			E	E	E	E	E		E		E	E	E			E	E	E	E	
Recommendation 3	c				E				E				E	E			E		E			E		E		E			E	
Recommendation 4	a						E		E	E			E	E			E					E	E	E		E		E	E	
Recommendation 5	h	E			E	E	E	E	E	E			E	E	E	E	E		E		E		E	E	E		E	E	E	E
Recommendation 6	h	L			L	L	L	L	L	L			L	L	L	L	L		L		L	L		L	L	L		L	L	L

Legend:

- L:** Recommendation for decision by legislative organ
E: Recommendation for action by executive head
☐: Recommendation does not require action by this organization

Intended impact:

a: Enhanced transparency and accountability; **b:** Dissemination of good/best practices; **c:** Enhanced coordination and cooperation; **d:** Strengthened coherence and harmonization; **e:** Enhanced control and compliance; **f:** Enhanced effectiveness; **g:** Significant financial savings; **h:** Enhanced efficiency; **i:** Other.

^a While recommendations 1–4 are relevant to the context of UNSDCF evaluations, JIU is aware of ongoing discussions concerning their overarching framework of implementation and thus these recommendations are issued to the United Nations Secretariat for information only. However, recommendation 5 is intended for the Development Coordination Office regardless of future changes that may be implemented to the UNSDCF evaluation approach.