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Joint Inspection Unit

United Nations common premises: current practices and future prospects

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “United Nations common premises: current practices and future prospects” (see [A/75/730](#)).



I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled “United Nations common premises: current practices and future prospects” (A/75/730), the Joint Inspection Unit undertakes a reflection on the further development of common premises, focusing in particular on reviewing progress made in carrying out legislative mandates; assessing the impact of the current reform context on efforts to expand common premises; and drawing lessons from experience to date on the organizational arrangements required to support the common premises agenda system-wide.

General comments

2. Organizations welcome the report and the analysis of current practices and potential future prospects on the subject of common premises, at both the national and regional levels.

3. A centralized management of common premises across the United Nations system is a coherent and rational long-term objective that organizations support, provided that it is cost-effective and in line with the technical and operational mandate of each entity and the country-specific priorities of its Member States.

4. For some, capital financing and the flexibility of common premises to accommodate the evolving programme needs of individual entities remain a significant challenge, incurring additional costs and operational complexities, above current baselines, that would require an assessment of the implications for programme delivery. This is particularly true for non-members of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group and for those entities with offices provided by Governments at no cost.

5. The eight recommendations in the review are broad and encompass topics beyond common premises, including statements on the reform. As a system-wide issue, action on common premises is beyond the mandate of any single organization. In this regard, the role of the host Governments could have been articulated more prominently in the formulation of the proposed recommendations, given that executive heads or legislative organs are not the drivers of common premises.

6. Organizations support an approach that can resolve financing for the construction of premises in a way that recognizes the primacy of the role of the host Government and the different needs of the United Nations system.

7. Organizations partially support the recommendations in the review.

II. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, by the end of 2021, give direction to the executive heads on the parameters of participation of their organizations in common premises and request periodic reporting on the results achieved.

8. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to their governing bodies.

9. Certain organizations that are currently receiving office space free of charge from host Governments note that their participation in common premises should involve no financial implications and the enjoyment of no fewer privileges, immunities and facilities than they are currently granted.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should work together in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to amplify, by the end of 2022, the objectives of common premises, addressing programmatic, public image and environmental sustainability considerations, as well as efficiency gains, and also set out the modalities for tracking results and reporting thereon.

10. Organizations support the recommendation.

11. The scope of the recommendation would fall under the work on the business operations strategy and the review of the back office function from a common premises angle, which may be considered by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, but not by the end of 2022.

12. Members of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group will be guided by the results of the review in implementing the recommendation.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General and the other executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by mid-2021, work together in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to re-examine the focus on a target of 50 per cent of common premises with a view to prioritizing efficiency gains.

13. Organizations support the recommendation.

14. Organizations recall that the Business Innovations Strategic Results Group efficiency strategy, approved in March 2020, retained an estimate of potential efficiencies in the order of \$310 million, to be realized by six Group projects (including common premises) through a more flexible approach with regard to the attribution of efficiency gains realized by co-location.

15. However, it needs to be noted that considerable capital funds, which are not available today, would be required to achieve the target of 50 per cent of common premises. Construction and refurbishment timelines are also key considerations in reviewing the target. In addition, in the case of some regional commissions, many of the subregional offices and regional institutes have office premises provided by the host Governments, therefore presenting certain limitations in relocating to rental premises.

Recommendation 4

The Secretary-General and the other executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should work together in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to expedite the compilation of the database component of the envisaged common premises platform by mid-2021 and ensure that periodic reporting to the General Assembly includes information on the status of the database and how the common premises platform is being used to contribute to the realization of efficiency gains and any other common premises objectives.

16. Organizations support the recommendation.

17. Along with the finalization of the country premises roll-out plan, the development of the country premises platform started in the second quarter of 2020, with financial resources available to move the project forward. The functional requirements of the database component of the platform were finalized by the Task

Team on Common Premises and Facility Services with the collaboration of the Business Innovations Strategic Results Group project team and handed over to the Development Coordination Office in June 2020.

18. The platform is expected to be fully running in the first quarter of 2021. The country premises roll-out includes verification of current premises data in each country. The other components of the platform are focused on the establishment by each country of a country common premises plan outlining projects in each city after a thorough review, tracking project implementation progress and computing efficiency gains as well as changes in the percentage of common premises.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General and the other executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should work together in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to review lessons learned from experience with public-private partnerships for common premises and formulate, by the end of 2022, measures that address the capital financing requirements of initiatives regarding common premises, including the possibility of a centrally administered mechanism, for consideration by the General Assembly if required.

19. Organizations partially support the recommendation.

20. Building on the Standard Basic Assistance Agreement and the role of the host Government in providing office premises, some organizations note that public-private partnerships for common premises should also be led by the host Government, which retains the appropriate accountabilities and mechanism to deal with such partnerships.

21. For some organizations, public-private partnerships remain an option of last resort considering the nature and time horizons of the presence of United Nations programmes in a given geographical area, sometimes relatively shorter than the usual timelines for a public-private partnership commitment.

22. The Task Team on Common Premises and Facility Services, in collaboration with the Development Coordination Office, is preparing a resources mobilization document to look into the feasibility of a centrally administered funding mechanism.

Recommendation 6

The General Assembly should, at its seventy-sixth session, request the Secretary-General to include, in consultation with the other executive heads of United Nations system organizations, as appropriate, the office space requirements of agencies, funds and programmes in the preparation of future strategic capital reviews of offices away from Headquarters and of the regional economic commissions.

23. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to the General Assembly.

24. The Business Operations Task Team has given the Task Team on Common Premises and Facility Services the task of conducting a study on working modalities following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the impact on space planning and the building footprint.

Recommendation 7

The Secretary-General and the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations with premises in the field should study the feasibility of a unified mechanism for real estate management in the field and report on the findings of that study to the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session.

25. Organizations partially support the recommendation.

26. A unified approach to real estate management is welcomed as it would free up country-level capacity to focus on other areas of operations management, but entities with premises funded by host Governments note that these could hardly be included in the scope of the proposed unified mechanism.

27. It is further suggested that the timeline should be amended, taking into consideration the fact that the funding that will be required to conduct such a feasibility study has not yet been earmarked, as well as the time required to conduct the study, which involves several stakeholders at the agency and country levels.

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should work together in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group to improve, by the end of 2021, the inter-organizational arrangements for support of common premises by strengthening the oversight of common premises by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, clarifying the role and authority of its inter-agency Task Team on Common Premises and Facility Services and directing an appropriately capacitated Development Coordination Office to support them in carrying out the common premises workstream. That support work should include analysis of priorities for future action, making arrangements for proactive support of country teams at all stages of project life cycles and drawing linkages to other facets of business operations.

28. Organizations support the recommendation, which reinforces the role of the Development Coordination Office in supporting the inter-agency Task Team on Common Premises and Facility Services. In addition, it would bring the common premises workstream in line with other Business Operations Task Team workstreams.