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Joint Inspection Unit

Review of the management of implementing partners in United Nations system organizations

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 “Review of the management of implementing partners in United Nations system organizations” ([JIU/REP/2021/4](#)).

* [A/77/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled “Management of implementing partners in United Nations system organizations” (A/77/257), the Joint Inspection Unit assesses the progress achieved since its 2013 review on the same topic and analyses the methods and practices used by United Nations organizations system-wide to select and manage implementing partners for programme and project delivery, to identify issues, strengths and weaknesses in current practices and to explore areas for further improvement for an effective and efficient management of implementing partners.

II. General comments

2. Organizations welcome the report and its findings, noting it provides detailed research and knowledge on the approach of the United Nations system to partner assessment, selection and engagement.

3. While agreeing with the spirit of bringing about system-wide coherence and harmonization of implementing partners management practices, future inter-agency coordination mechanisms on implementing partners must mature, keeping United Nations entities’ specific requirements in perspective, without being resource-intensive.

4. Some note that the report presents a dichotomy between concerns about financial wrongdoing risks and sexual exploitation and abuse risks. While both are critical challenges, they are different in nature and should not be presented in a way suggesting there is a hierarchy in terms of attention and resources to be dedicated to each.

5. It is also noted that while some United Nations Secretariat entities have established their own guidelines on the engagement of implementing partners, all Secretariat entities follow the same process in the enterprise resource planning system. Presenting separate findings for Secretariat offices is misleading and incorrect.

6. The term “capacity-building”, as referred to in proposed recommendations 3 and 9, may create the confusing impression that capacity is currently absent and must be “built”. Local responders should be given the ability to define their own reform agenda, and United Nations organizations should (a) offer to assist and guide them in the definition of that agenda and support in its implementation, and (b) address areas in which multiple organizations have a common need for strengthening.

7. Organizations partially support the review’s recommendations, although they are committed to contributing to inter-agency initiatives resulting from the proposed recommendations.

III. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2024, develop, through consultations in the appropriate inter-agency mechanisms, a common system-wide definition and a set of agreed guiding principles and standards for implementing partners that is informed by a risk-based and strategic approach to partnerships and results-based management methodology.

8. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

9. While there should be alignment and coherence in the frameworks that govern implementing partnerships, crucial differences exist between United Nations entities that will have an impact on operational procedures. In some cases, the definition of the term “implementing partner” is embedded within existing financial rules that cannot be changed unilaterally by the executive heads. The proposed timeline for development of such complex frameworks for partnership management is unrealistic.

10. The use and management of implementing partners is both a programmatic and a financial oversight issue. It is a delivery modality that may have fiduciary issues, especially since the range of implementing partners (big and small) and the diverse nature of the business models of different United Nations entities call for differing arrangements.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of organizations of the United Nations system should, by the end of 2023, include in their annual reports on the work of the organization a section on the engagement and management of their implementing partners, including important details useful to the legislative organs and governing bodies.

11. Organizations partially support this recommendation. While agreeing with the concept of having more information and transparency regarding implementing partners engagement, entities believe it should continue to be left to their discretion to identify how and where to make this information available.

12. While some entities do not produce annual reports, others do not include in such reports the proposed level of detail owing to different factors, including the high-level nature of their reporting, word limitations and designated portals already including the proposed details (such as the United Nations Development Programme’s transparency portal¹).

13. Entities that do not include implementing partners as a significant part of their business model find that the proposed recommendation would not fit the existing governance models. The proposed 2023 deadline is not practical, considering the complexity of the issues involved.

Recommendation 3

The legislative organs and governing bodies of organizations of the United Nations system should, starting in 2024 and on the basis of reports submitted to them annually by their respective executive heads, provide overall strategic guidance and legislative oversight to the management of their implementing partners, including in the framework of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review, especially with regard to capacity-building, inter-agency coordination and information-sharing.

14. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the legislative and governing bodies.

15. They further note that this recommendation should be revisited in the light of the 2021–2024 quadrennial comprehensive policy review monitoring framework, which has dedicated indicators to track United Nations system engagement with national and international partners at the country level, and that reporting should be within existing reporting modalities.

¹ Available at open.undp.org.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, update as necessary and implement their implementing partner policies and related guidance, including standard operating procedures for the selection, engagement, management, oversight and evaluation of implementing partners, to sustain a strategic and risk-based approach to implementing partner management, aligned to the entity's strategic framework.

16. Organizations support this recommendation.

17. Efforts to harmonize implementing partner policies and guidelines are already in place, and entities regularly and continuously develop, review and update policies and guidance for implementing partners management to adapt to emerging needs, align with the strategic plans, further inter-agency harmonization and improve effectiveness and efficiency. Considering the complexity of the issues involved, the proposed 2023 deadline is considered too tight.

18. The High-level Committee on Management Finance and Budget Network, in considering the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, suggested that relevant recommendations be included in the workplan of the United Nations Partner Portal group. The Finance and Budget Network further encouraged entities that have not yet joined the Partner Portal group to do so and leverage policies and practices that have already been established with respect to implementing partners.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis, establish an implementing partner unit or designate, by the end of 2024, a focal point for the management of implementing partners to support the coordination of implementing partner policies and activities within the organization, including by providing policy guidance and backstopping and by facilitating liaison and information-sharing, under terms of reference that clearly define its role and responsibilities.

19. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

20. Entities that do not currently have the proposed measure in place underscore that the establishment of a dedicated unit presents resource implications that require approval by the legislative bodies.

21. Some underscore that a centralized level unit should issue policy guidelines at a high level, allowing entities to retain operational control over implementing partner arrangements, in alignment with the decentralized nature of implementing partner management, and therefore support these functions but not a separate stand-alone unit in all cases.

22. Others favour continuing within existing structures, through the establishment and updating of policies for implementation agreements and guidelines.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system should incorporate implementing partner risks into their organization's risk management frameworks by the end of 2023.

23. Organizations support this recommendation, noting that such measures are already in place and subject to continuous improvement.

24. In the case of the United Nations Secretariat, implementing partner risks are included in the Secretariat-wide risk register, the risk register of specific Secretariat entities and the annual statement of internal control.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should develop, by the end of 2024, key performance indicators for the management of implementing partners and establish systems to collect, monitor and report the performance data.

25. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

26. While recognizing that it is conceptually valuable, some note that meaningful and harmonized key performance indicators should exist for any of the gathered data to be comparable. This would involve the need to develop and introduce an additional global system for collating data, which does not exist at the moment, and would require investment of time and resources.

27. Organizations collect, monitor and report data for several key performance indicators related to implementing partners, including in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review monitoring framework 2021–2024, and recognize this is an area of current and future attention.

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, share among themselves, through existing inter-agency mechanisms/forums, their specialized training materials and modules for the management of implementing partners, including due diligence, risk and capacity assessments of partners, results based and risk-based performance monitoring, fraud prevention, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, capacity-building, working with local non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, the harmonized approach to cash transfers and the United Nations Partner Portal.

28. Organizations welcome this recommendation.

29. Entities value their engagement in the inter-agency implementing partners management meetings to exchange information and approaches on managing implementing partners and to consider the feasibility of sharing specialized training materials and modules for the management of implementing partners that are publicly available.

30. Furthermore, organizations support the sharing of information, fraud prevention, the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, the harmonized approach to cash transfers, due diligence, and risk and capacity assessment of partners. The increasing adoption of the United Nations Partner Portal and use of existing inter-agency platforms and partnerships learning platforms such as DisasterReady are expected to facilitate such sharing, which will lead to a cross-fertilization of knowledge across the United Nations system.

31. This also aligns well with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Champion priorities for 2022 and with the mandate of the Office of the Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse to promote a system-wide approach.

Recommendation 9

The legislative organs and governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should, beginning in 2023, assess their approaches to capacity-building of implementing partners and strengthening national capacities and ownership, in the framework of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review, including the effectiveness of such efforts since 2013, progress made and lessons learned, based on reports prepared by their respective secretariats, and adopt specific measures to strengthen national capacities and ownership and build the capacities of their implementing partners.

32. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the legislative organs and governing bodies and that the proposed timing for its implementation is quite ambitious and should be extended.

33. Several entities also note that, as their field programmes are almost entirely funded by voluntary contributions through earmarked projects, the use of resources for specific measures for implementing partners capacity-building as a primary deliverable is severely limited.

Recommendation 10

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2024 and with the support of the Development Coordination Office, resident coordinator offices and the United Nations country team mechanisms, agree upon specific measures to further strengthen inter-agency coordination for improving implementing partner management at the country level and report on the implementation to their respective legislative organs and governing bodies from 2025.

34. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

35. As stated in paragraph 10 above, the use and management of implementing partners is both a programmatic and a financial oversight issue.

36. Efforts to strengthen inter-agency coordination should adhere to the commitments made in the quadrennial comprehensive policy review monitoring framework 2021–2024. Under the new management and accountability framework, the Development Coordination Office, resident coordinator offices and, in most cases, United Nations country teams do not have an implementation mandate, as this rests with the responsible United Nations entities.

37. The Development Coordination Office and resident coordinator offices might play an important role in harmonizing various delivery modalities and business models and thus supporting United Nations country teams capacities, in particular through the collection and dissemination of good practices and innovative approaches across United Nations country teams.
