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Sustainable development

Joint Inspection Unit

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

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

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 “Strengthening policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” ([JIU/REP/2018/7](#)).

* [A/74/150](#).



Summary

In its report entitled “Strengthening policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” ([JIU/REP/2018/7](#)), the Joint Inspection Unit reviews, for the first time, the policy research function within the United Nations system and its role in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The present note reflects the views of organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of input provided by organizations that are members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported many of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit, entitled “Strengthening policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (JIU/REP/2018/7), contains the first review of the policy research function within the United Nations system and offers evidence of the updating of policy research, identifies gaps and overlaps in research cycles and outlines possible ways to produce and use research more effectively, in particular in support of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. General comments

2. The organizations of the United Nations system welcomed the report of the Joint Inspection Unit and its findings and recommendations. They appreciated the ambitious and comprehensive nature of the report and favoured its further dissemination among staff members involved in research. They also noted that diversity of views and research findings is one of the strengths of the United Nations system.

3. The organizations expressed mixed opinions about the practicality of establishing general guidelines and policies, recognizing that research requires a certain degree of freedom, including sufficient space for innovation and for response to new and unexpected requests stemming from intergovernmental processes. The heterogeneous nature of their respective mandates makes the organizations hesitant about the establishment of strict standard protocols.

4. The organizations underscored that, in many instances, research is proposed, approved and supervised by Member States and other governing bodies. In other cases, decisions on lines of research are based on regional or specific country needs and situations, which also respond to mandates set by Member States and are not unilaterally defined by the organizations.

5. The organizations recognized that the 2030 Agenda had opened new approaches for collaborative research and research uptake throughout the United Nations system (for example, in the work of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism and the United Nations inter-agency task team that supports it and through expert groups, either structured groups or thematically driven ad hoc groups) and that such collaboration can further the transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work required for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and promote connections with academics, the scientific community, young researchers and civil society. However, some of these new approaches might not be resourced properly, hindering their potential for realization.

6. Some organizations noted that the review had not captured, in full, the essence of innovation and research culture and its acceptance of failures and frank discussions on policy and science. There are limits to tolerance of failure, driven partly by the need for accountability to Member States with respect to use of resources, which might contribute to the perceived risk-averse nature of United Nations research. Others noted the omission of standard-setting research activities from the review, which, in their view, show an inextricable link between research and policymaking, and which might have served as an illustrative example.

7. The organizations underlined that the institutional configuration of research uptake among organizations in the United Nations system should be flexible and should account for the particularity of each organization’s mandate, scope of research, strategic objectives and dedicated financial and human resources.

8. The organizations welcomed the idea of a mechanism for following up on the delivery of research, although they note there may be limitations on how much joint agenda-setting may be possible, given the breadth of their mandates and the fact that such a mechanism might require resources and time beyond the means of most research departments.

9. The organizations partially supported the provisions of the proposed recommendations and noted that the deadline provided for the implementation of most of the recommendations (the end of 2020) is very short, considering that the recommendations must be the subject of broad consultation throughout the United Nations system and might require the establishment of mechanisms for their implementation if accepted.

III. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

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

10. The organizations recognize the need to define a minimum set of standards, whether at the United Nations system-wide level or at the organizational level. However, they partially support this recommendation and note that it should be interpreted and implemented with a significant level of flexibility in order to respond to the different needs that derive from the differences in the size, nature and mandate of each entity.

11. While a minimum set of standards would help with quality control, it will be necessary to preserve intellectual autonomy and flexibility in terms of research priorities in order to avoid completely losing the ability to undertake horizon-scanning and to identify innovative research topics. Some basic guidelines can be developed that give more visibility to diverse research efforts and establish mechanisms for internal and external dissemination and for the validation of results, data quality and standards regarding the use of external knowledge.

Recommendation 2

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

12. The organizations do not support this recommendation, noting that its implementation would require adjustments in programming processes and related information technology systems and policies. Hence, it would involve additional resources and is not a priority for many, at least not by 2020.

13. Underscoring that the report focuses on the strengthening of policy research uptake, some suggest that if costs are to be assessed, they should be assessed not only for research per se, but for all actions that relate to policy research uptake. Others note that research investment could be better measured not only by costs but by research impact, for example through policy adoption, citation and adoption of research findings.

Recommendation 3

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

14. While this recommendation is addressed to the Economic and Social Council, the organizations note that the review of the research agenda of the regional commissions should include the research agendas of other regional organizations with a research mandate in order to avoid duplication and to strengthen synergies.

15. The current formulation of the recommendation does not appear to reflect the fact that the research agenda of the regional commissions respond to regional mandates and are subject to oversight from their respective governing bodies. The organizations also note that it may be more useful to orient the proposed recommendation towards the knowledge hub for the improvement of policy coherence and coordination in the regions, as suggested by the Secretary-General (A/74/73-E/2019/14).

16. The regional commissions underscore that, on the issue of partnership and resource allocation, some of the challenges that affect their work include: (a) different administrative rules and procedures for coding job titles and responsibilities among United Nations entities; (b) financial rules and rigidities pertaining to United Nations staff contract modalities; and (c) partnerships with academic research institutions and centres, which makes it difficult to ascertain concrete research outputs and time invested by staff in research-related activity.

Recommendation 4

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

17. The organizations support this recommendation, and, to avoid the risk of the research agenda becoming too ad hoc instead of stable and incremental, they suggest that time elapsed between the assessments needs to be sufficiently long.

18. Some organizations note that the purpose of collaboration with potential “suppliers” (academics) should not be limited to their role in strengthening internal capacities since the focus of United Nations research, including flagship publications and other research products, changes periodically. Subject-matter knowledge acquired by academic experts through years of research cannot be developed by United Nations staff over the course of months. Accordingly, academic experts are not brought in to provide short-term training on broad research methods, but rather to share their in-depth expertise on the research theme in order to deepen understanding of those themes by the staff of the organizations of the United Nations system and to bridge gap between academic research and its real-world application.

19. The organizations underscore the complementary role of different entities and the need to capitalize on the already existing research and knowledge available in the organizations of the United Nations system, including its flagship publications, particularly those already capitalizing on the expertise of various partners.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General of the United Nations should extend his commitment to assess the work of research and training institutes and include the research work

of other United Nations system organizations, in the light of the system-wide findings and recommendations made in the present report.

20. The organizations generally support this recommendation and welcome the commitment to cross-organizational collaboration and partnerships with other United Nations entities. However, some organizations expressed the opinion that how it would be implemented is unclear, and others that the recommendation seems to underestimate the rigorous and extensive literature reviews that they undertake.

21. Some suggest that the proposed assessment could be expanded to other organizations in order to enhance the use of scarce resources in the United Nations system and avoid duplication. However, that suggestion needs to be weighed against the cost of tracking the research work of other organizations while taking into account the fact that some entities do not have a research function at the core of their mandate.

Recommendation 6

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

22. The organizations generally support this recommendation and agree that open data access and research-sharing among the organizations of the United Nations system will have a positive impact on the visibility of research products and will maximize the use of advances in digital technologies. They also note that putting general sharing arrangements in place involves costs, while the benefits (outside of the existence of well-defined forms of collaboration) are uncertain. Others mention the need for safeguards to ensure the protection of sensitive data and to maximize the use of existing platforms before creating new ones.

Recommendation 7

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

23. While the organizations generally support this recommendation, they find the proposed text rather broad and not directly connected to how research is done nor how uptake occurs.

24. Several organizations hold expert group meetings specifically to ensure that researchers from the South are adequately represented and heard. Those expert group meetings often inform the research functions of the organizations. Expert group meetings play an important role in expanding the involvement of researchers from the South.

25. The organizations seek clarity on what is to be reported on, specifically: (a) the level of involvement of researchers from the South; (b) the adoption of policies and frameworks for capacity-building on policy research functions; and/or (c) research uptake at the national level. They also seek clarity on who should carry out those assessments across agencies and sectors, as well as on the related costs.

Recommendation 8

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

26. The organizations support this recommendation and invite additional exploration of the feasibility of the deadline.

Recommendation 9

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

27. The organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to governing bodies.

28. Diversity of views and research findings is one of the strengths of the United Nations system. The organizations invite consideration of this recommendation in connection with recommendation 6 in order to avoid any duplication. They also underline that inter-agency collaboration should not be the end goal of the respective research functions of United Nations entities and that while data-sharing is a central component of collaborative research, quality assurance measures and safeguards are required to ensure the protection of sensitive data.

29. The organizations also suggest that existing platforms be used or maximized before new ones are created. Knowledge-based organizations and inter-agency thematic networks such as UN-Water (where evidence generated by members and partners is made available to all potential users) are a good example of improved coordination and availability of data and research. In addition, under the guidance of the United Nations Expert Group on Migration Statistics and the United Nations Statistical Commission, the Secretariat is building a knowledge platform to facilitate the exchange of good practices in the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics on international migration.

Recommendation 10

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

30. The organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the General Assembly.

31. While recognizing that the implementation of such a recommendation might help raise the visibility of the research products of entities not governed by the General Assembly, the organizations are unclear as to whether this would significantly increase the uptake of policy research.

32. The organizations also note that any measure taken by the General Assembly in reference to the above recommendation should not involve any additional costs or burdens on specialized agencies.

Recommendation 11

The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization should consider the creation, on an experimental and voluntary basis, of a United Nations-academic joint publication board with the task of identifying research needs at the system-wide level and the most efficient ways to produce, disseminate and uptake policy research in a collaborative and participatory manner, by the end of 2020 at the latest.

33. The organizations partially support the recommendation. Although they support the idea of developing more efficient ways of producing, disseminating and taking up policy research in a collaborative and participatory manner, they note that publication officers are already exchanging experiences related to research and publishing trends through the publication officer inter-agency meeting.

34. As noted in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, the organizations conduct diverse types of research for different purposes. Some research is prepared for very concrete operational purposes and some for broader and more long-term processes, including informing and steering the United Nations development agenda or bringing emerging global trends to the attention of Member States. Standardizing the production, dissemination and uptake of all research could be counterproductive, especially if done in a top-down manner.

35. In addition, it might be difficult to decide on such a broad scale what research needs might be and the process might take too long to be effective.

Recommendation 12

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

36. The organizations generally support the recommendation to encourage long-term partnerships with academic communities at the global, regional and national levels. In line with existing successful partnerships with regionally and globally recognized academic institutions, the establishment of basic guidelines for such partnerships in order to encourage better relationships is also welcomed.

37. The organizations note that long-term partnerships are best suited to academic institutions rather than operational entities or secretariats, especially if the aim is to foster new partnerships with institutions of the global South or to have the ability to partner with the best-placed academic entity for a particular project. In addition, long-term partnerships would need a commitment by the heads of entities to invest in the improvement of staff research skills, which the report identified as lacking.

38. The guidelines for academic partnerships that already exist through the United Nations University and the University for Peace should be leveraged. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat already serves an integrative function in terms of partnerships and the 2030 Agenda.