General Assembly

Seventy-sixth session
Item 144 of the provisional agenda*
Joint Inspection Unit

Review of mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system

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 mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system" (see A/76/286).

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* A/76/150.

I. Introduction

1.   In its report entitled "Review of mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system" (see A/76/286),[1] the Joint Inspection Unit undertakes a review of contemporary policies and practices in mainstreaming environmental sustainability in the United Nations system organizations for the period 2012–2019, including data for 2020 as available.

II. General comments

2.   Organizations welcome the report and its findings and appreciate its timeliness, shortly after the endorsement of the Strategy for Sustainability Management in the United Nations System, 2020–2030, by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, in particular phase I thereof, which covers environmental sustainability in the area of management.

3.   Entities note many overlaps between the Unit's proposed recommendations and the management functions contained in the Strategy for the period 2020–2030, although the Unit's proposed deadlines are not aligned with the Strategy's more realistic time frames.

4.   The review provides a valuable baseline for addressing shortcomings in the management of sustainability in United Nations system organizations, in inter-agency mechanisms and in the management areas considered by the Strategy for the period 2020–2030.

5.   From an environmental footprint reduction perspective, organizations note that a recommendation on travel would have been more effective, including in meeting the commitments of the Strategy for the period 2020–2030. Entities also would have appreciated a clear key recommendation about sustainable facilities management.

6.   While the review acknowledges inter-agency coordination as a major motor of progress, particularly over the past 10 years, it also raises high expectations with respect to inter-agency support, guidance, data and progress verification, without expanding on the means required for such expectations to be met in the future.

7.   Entities recognize that the timelines envisioned could present various challenges, including as regards coordination among various organizations in the same location (e.g. policies and actions affecting the operations of the Vienna International Centre), programmatic cycle timelines and the deep involvement of some organizations in the response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

8.   Organizations partially support the review's recommendations.

III. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, by the end of 2022, develop an organization-wide policy for environmental sustainability in the areas of internal management functions.

9.   Organizations partially support this recommendation.

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[1] The report of the Joint Inspection Unit is available under the symbol JIU/REP/2020/8.

10.   The Strategy for the period 2020–2030 also calls for all United Nations system entities to develop an organization-wide environmental sustainability policy, in the context of developing an environmental management system by 2025.

11.   Some entities note that the time frame may be too tight, while others would prefer to have in place an agreed "conceptualization" of environmental sustainability within the United Nations system first, developed through existing inter-agency platforms.

12.   The United Nations Secretariat recalls its existing environmental policy as contained in the Secretary-General's bulletin entitled "Environmental policy for the United Nations Secretariat" (ST/SGB/2019/7).

Recommendation 2

The legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, by the end of 2022, direct the executive heads to embed environmental sustainability considerations into the management of their organizations and request them to include in the annual report on the work of the organization the results of efforts to mainstream environmental sustainability in the internal management functions of the organization.

13.   Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to their legislative or governing bodies.

14.   Organizations note that since the publication of the review, the General Assembly, in its resolution 75/233, called upon entities of the United Nations development system to "Advance the development of a system-wide approach, implement measures and report regularly to their respective governing bodies, through existing reporting and mandates, on their efforts to reduce their climate and environmental footprint; ensure consistency of their operations and programmes with low emissions and climate-resilient development pathways; stressing the urgency of climate action and contribute to the post-2020 global biodiversity framework" (ibid., para. 29 (b)).

15.   The Governing Body of the International Labour Office, at its 340th session, held in October and November 2020, adopted a decision in which it requested the Director General to, inter alia, continue to pursue carbon neutrality at the International Labour Organization, in line with the United Nations target to reach carbon neutrality by 2020, and report back to the Governing Body on the implementation of that request. However, the International Labour Office presents its performance and results to its Governing Body in its biennial implementation report, rather than on an annual basis.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2022, devote adequate resources in specific budget plans, including by better utilizing existing available resources, to mainstreaming environmental sustainability in their respective organizations, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

16.   Organizations partially support this recommendation, noting that budget processes for 2022 might already be well advanced and a deadline in 2023 instead might be more realistic. Moreover, they observe that often, such financial commitments can only be increased following approval by the legislative or governing bodies.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, by the end of 2022, task procurement offices with incorporating specific provisions for integrating environmental sustainability considerations into procurement policies, procedures, manuals and guidelines, including through the relevant inter-agency mechanisms, as necessary.

17. Organizations partially support this recommendation, considering that the incorporation of specific provisions into their procurement policies and procedures requires the endorsement of their respective intergovernmental organs and/or bodies. They further note that achieving the proposed 2022 target for implementing all the aspects described in the recommendation may be challenging.

18. In addition, some organizations underscore the importance of disseminating this guidance as widely as possible, so as to allow entities to adjust its application based on differences between locations and operational contexts, including emergency situations where environmental sustainability needs must be considered alongside operational exigencies.

19. Organizations recall that the Strategy for Sustainability Management in the United Nations System, 2020–2030, identifies procurement as one of the six key management functions and sets the objective that entities systematically integrate sustainability considerations into procurement and provide indicators of progress for procurement.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2022, ensure that all recruitment and selection processes, as well as performance appraisal systems, incorporate and give adequate weight to environmental sustainability understanding and behaviours, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

20. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

21. They recognize the importance of incorporating the value of environmental sustainability in the United Nations system's common culture and recall that the Strategy for the period 2020–2030 identifies human resources as one of the six key management functions and sets the objective that environmental management is integrated into United Nations existing capacity-building and accountability frameworks. In the United Nations Secretariat, environmental sustainability is reflected in the new values and behaviours framework to be launched in 2021.

22. Some entities, however, share the same concern, noted in paragraph 135 of the report (JIU/REP/2020/8), that it would be cumbersome to add more values, competencies and skills to be tested as part of recruitment processes, especially those that are not directly related to the vacancy's technical requirements, and that it would be difficult to measure and assess environmental awareness. They further note that a system-wide framework and/or guideline for evaluating environmental sustainability understanding and behaviours would be required in order to determine the feasibility of implementing the recommendation and the reasonableness of the deadline by end of 2022. Alternative approaches, such as training personnel once on board, may be more efficient and effective.

23. Regarding the suggested review of the appraisal system and its applicability to all staff, some entities support addressing the matter in a manner that would be relevant and contribute added value, including, for example, by providing increased training to promote understanding of environmental sustainability, or by giving

recognition, within the scope of the performance management, for proactive actions, innovative thinking and contributions to environmental sustainability.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2022, with the support of the resident coordinator system and the United Nations country team mechanisms, strengthen the coordination between the headquarters and field agencies, as well as among field agencies, in pursuing measures to reduce the environmental impact of field presences, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

24.   Organizations support this recommendation.

25.   The Strategy for the period 2020–2030 identifies facilities management as one of the six key management functions and sets the objective that all United Nations facilities, led by United Nations common premises, follow sustainable building standards or harmonized guidance for sustainable building management.

26.   Environmentally sustainable measures have been incorporated in the delivery of the efficiency agenda targets, namely the business operations strategy 2.0, the common back office and the common premises. The business operations strategy and the common back office include environmental sustainability considerations and targets in the delivery of services throughout 131 countries.

27.   The task team on common premises has adopted sustainability guidelines established by the United Nations Environment Programme and the guidelines should be followed by all country and field offices when establishing new premises.

28.   Some are of the view that the above recommendation should be limited only to those measures that have no financial cost associated with them, in cases in which the entity's budget does not foresee any provision for such measures in its field offices in the coming years. The inclusion of funding for sustainability measures in the facilities/premises budget will contribute in a significant way to implementing measures to reduce the environmental impact of offices.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2022, make all conferences, events and meetings organized by their respective organizations "paper smart", while providing printed material only upon official request and with adequate cost recovery measures following a differential pricing system in respect of different customer groups – such as official delegates, research institutions, other conference participants and students – and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

29.   Organizations partially support this recommendation.

30.   While "paper smart" practices have been in use for quite some time, entities note it may not be desirable to try to eliminate all printing (and/or ensure cost recovery) as suggested by the Unit, as the elimination of printed material might actually impede organizations' communication objectives (i.e. advocacy and outreach materials such as posters, flyers and banners).

31.   Some suggest that the recommendation should rather focus on increasing the use of remote conferencing tools, building on its successful use since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, entities are looking at opportunities to mainstream the positive aspects of virtual meetings under a "new normal", including the environmental benefits and lessons learned, ushered in by the pandemic.

32.   The United Nations Secretariat recalls that when the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management set forth to reduce paper usage within the United Nations Secretariat in 2010, a point was made that this was not an initiative against paper but against waste. The manner in which paper is used in conferences is expected to continue to reflect this and ensure that hard copies can be provided upon request, which is an approach that has been largely supported by Member States.

Recommendation 8

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should, by the end of 2022, task the relevant offices responsible for organizing conferences, meetings and events with developing a policy for incorporating provisions relating to environmental sustainability considerations into policies, procedures, manuals and guidelines, including through the relevant inter-agency mechanisms, as necessary.

33.   Organizations partially support this recommendation.

34.   The Strategy for the period 2020-2030 identifies events as one of the six key management functions and sets the objective that United Nations events on any topic showcase the Organization's commitment to sustainability. The goal is for all events with more than 300 participants to be climate neutral. The strategy focuses on the environmental impact of events as a whole and more particularly on greenhouse gas emissions, which, along with travel, represent the greatest environmental impact of events.

35.   While it is important to note that the manner in which conferences are convened and conducted is usually determined by Member States, and for conferences away from headquarters, by the host countries (in accordance with the host country agreement), organizations will continuously strive to implement environmentally sustainable practices.

Recommendation 9

The executive heads of organizations of the United Nations system should ensure that, by the end of 2022, information and communications technology services' actions and projects comply with environmental sustainability considerations, including ensuring that greenhouse gas emissions are at a level compatible with the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

36.   Organizations partially support this recommendation.

37.   Entities agree that this management function is of paramount importance for the delivery of the United Nations system's collective sustainability ambitions, and not only for environmental objectives. The Strategy for the period 2020–2030 identifies Information and communications technology (ICT) as one of the six key management functions and sets the objective of aligning the ICT function with the ambitions of the strategy.

38.   However, some note that in order to reach a target by end of 2022, the United Nations system would need to have a recognized methodology for establishing a separate baseline for greenhouse gas emissions relating to ICT, as well as establishing targets. Others point to the fact that actions and projects relating to ICT are always part of an overall programme activity, and that consideration of alignment with the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will be addressed as part of recommendation 1.

39. An additional consideration in respect of the ability to meet the proposed timeline is the dependence on third parties for ICT hosting solutions, including the United Nations International Computing Centre and public cloud providers.

40. Resource constraints, or in other cases, activities organized by biennium, might also infringe on delivering by the set deadline.

Recommendation 10

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2022, make all official documentation, publications, brochures and communication and advocacy materials available online, including through online conferencing applications or other information technology means, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

41. Organizations partially support this recommendation, while noting certain overlaps with recommendations 7 and 9.

42. Entities wonder whether the recommendation relates to the awareness-raising and advocacy materials referred to in the relevant chapter of the Joint Inspection Unit report that led to the recommendation and assume that there will still be some hard-copy brochures, posters and advocacy materials, along with the availability of an online version.

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