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Joint Inspection Unit

Flexible working arrangements 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 “Flexible working arrangements in United Nations system organizations” ([JIU/REP/2023/6](#)).



I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled “Flexible working arrangements in United Nations system organizations” ([JIU/REP/2023/6](#)) provides an assessment and comparative analysis of the current flexible working arrangement policies and practices in use in the United Nations system organizations, with a view to exploring areas for further improvement, identifying good practices and lessons learned and enhancing coherence system-wide. The purpose of the review is to inform the legislative organs, governing bodies and executive heads of JIU participating organizations about the status, utilization and implementation of such policies and practices in the United Nations system.

II. General comments

2. Organizations welcome the report and some of its findings and appreciate the comprehensive and comparative information contained therein. The report allows organizations to compare and, if necessary, review their policies and practices as the topic of flexible working arrangements continues to be discussed at the inter-agency level and, for the aspects relating to compensation, with the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC).

3. Some organizations observe that the term “telecommuting” is used in the report to refer to various modalities that are being used in different situations to address different needs (for example, at the request of the staff member or of the organization). They further note that as a result, some of the findings that would seem to apply to only one of the modalities are reported under the general term of “telecommuting” and that a more precise breakdown of the various modalities would have supported more specific findings.

4. Some organizations concur with the aim of the review, namely, to work towards further harmonization of flexible working arrangements across the United Nations common system, while noting that different organizations face different challenges based on their programmatic needs and operational models.

5. Organizations recognize the importance of continuing to engage with and leverage best practices and approaches in the ever-changing landscape of work. While system-wide initiatives such as the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work should strongly influence organization-specific implementation, organizations emphasize the need for flexibility to customize their flexible working arrangement policies to suit their specific needs, as articulated in greater detail in their comments on the proposed recommendations, in particular recommendations 7 and 8.

6. While organizations recognize the importance of data-driven decision-making, many note the challenges and additional administrative burden and cost relating to the analysis and routine publication of specific data. The related operational costs must be manageable, and the development of the required system must be aligned with the organizational culture and digitalization priorities. More details in that regard are provided in the comments on recommendations 2 and 4.

7. Organizations will assess whether the findings of the review can be addressed within available resources and in alignment with the need to maintain some flexibility in the implementation of approaches to flexible working arrangements among United Nations system organizations.

8. In reference to proposed recommendations 7 and 9, organizations recall the relevance of option 3, as contained in paragraph 39 of the review of the acceptance and implementation of JIU recommendations: The United Nations System Chief

Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) (JIU/ML/2016/25), when formulating recommendations intended to enhance collaboration and cooperation within the framework of CEB.

9. Organizations partially support the recommendations, noting the need for alignment with the new terminology promulgated in the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work and for clear strategic guidance at the United Nations common system level.

III. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure, at the earliest opportunity or in the context of established internal policy review processes, that a generic definition of flexible working arrangements is included in their organization's policy guidance, in order to clearly establish the scope of the policy and differentiate the arrangements from other forms of flexible work.

10. Several organizations report having already implemented the proposed recommendation or being in the process of reviewing their policies.¹ The remaining ones support the above-mentioned recommendation to the extent that each organization remains free to define the scope of its flexible working arrangements policy individually, including the types of flexible working arrangements that are available in each organization.

11. Some organizations acknowledge the opinion of JIU that part-time employment does not constitute a flexible working arrangement and should therefore be excluded from the corresponding policies and incorporated into another internal regulatory document.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should develop, by the end of 2026, methods to measure the impact of the assumed benefits and the unintended consequences of flexible working arrangements, including the effects of prolonged teleworking modalities, to ensure that the arrangements in place are in the best interests of the personnel and the organization.

12. Not all organizations support this recommendation.

13. Organizations acknowledge the value of leveraging data to guide decision-making and set strategic priorities but share different views and experiences regarding how the impact of the assumed benefits has been measured and can be measured in the future. They also have reservations about whether the proposed recommendation calls for a system-wide approach under the common system.

14. Some organizations are of the view that the development of concrete methods to measure the impact of the assumed benefits and other consequences of flexible working arrangements should be the responsibility of individual organizations, taking into account their specific needs, structure and mission.

15. Organizations note that the benefits associated with flexible working arrangements (for example, increased productivity, work-life balance, greater well-

¹ In the case of the United Nations Secretariat, Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2019/3](#) already includes a definition and lists the available modalities, thereby clearly defining the scope of flexible working arrangements.

being and job satisfaction) are influenced by many internal and external factors. For some organizations, isolating and concretely measuring the impact of flexible working arrangements on those benefits would require internal resources and capacity that are not currently available. Others argue that it is difficult to measure the actual impact of the benefits that flexible working arrangements are assumed to provide, along with their unintended consequences, on such factors as attracting and retaining personnel and boosting productivity. This challenge arises from the numerous factors influencing those parameters and from the lack of a comparative counterfactual for assessment.

16. Many organizations have struggled to find numerical data to assess the overall impact of flexible working arrangements beyond qualitative measures. They welcome the opportunity to share experiences, including engaging with JIU, to identify common parameters and practical ways to use such measurements effectively and consistently among the different common system organizations.

17. Some organizations continue to explore the use of their enterprise resource planning and other innovative tools for this purpose through the development of related applications and online functions to collect numerical data on flexible working arrangements, while others reiterate that measures of the impact on productivity can be found in the performance appraisal reports.

18. The continuous assessment of staff performance, regardless of the working modalities, ensures that organizational performance, programme delivery and capacity to assist legislative bodies are supported. It is assumed that the reference to “prolonged telecommuting” refers to full-time telecommuting (i.e., outside the duty station or five days per week at the duty station), which is permitted only for a limited duration under United Nations Secretariat policy. This recommendation therefore does not apply to the Secretariat, which does not offer remote work as a contractual option.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should integrate flexible working arrangement considerations into the next iteration of their organization’s human resources management strategy, in order to ensure a strategic approach to flexible working arrangements.

19. Most organizations support this recommendation.

20. Most organizations have already implemented the proposed recommendation, while others confirm their plans to do so in the next iteration of their human resources-related strategies. A few mention the importance of timing the proposed integration in accordance with the availability of resources and competing organizational priorities.

21. The human resources strategy of the Secretariat is pitched at the level of strategic outcomes, with three main pillars: diversity, agility and accountability. As such, provisions on flexible working arrangements are already more appropriately contained in the relevant policy documents.

Recommendation 4

The legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request, by the end of 2025, that the executive heads provide, as part of reporting on human resources management, periodic updates on the implementation of flexible working arrangements and teleworking policies, including statistical data, disaggregated by gender and other relevant

dimensions, with a view to ensuring data-driven and evidence-based decision-making on flexible working arrangements management.

22. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the legislative and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations.

23. In line with the comments on recommendation 2, organizations highlight the inherent difficulties in measuring and evaluating the impact of flexible work, including telework, in a systematic manner. Qualitative assessments based on surveys or data on the number of personnel benefiting from flexible work can be produced, but evidence-based information on the impact of flexible work and telework remains difficult for many.

24. Consistent with the Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere, the Secretariat leverages data to guide decision-making and set strategic priorities and notes that flexible working arrangement policies are internal arrangements that are already implemented within the existing policy framework and resources.

25. With that in mind, the recommendation as formulated is not useful for organizations in which the assessment and decision-making regarding flexible working arrangements and teleworking policies fall within the remit of executive heads. Furthermore, it is understood that, in most organizations, flexible working arrangements and teleworking policies are not contractual provisions or entitlements suitable for periodic reporting, but rather individually agreed working arrangements requiring case-by-case approval depending on the concrete situation.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure, by 2025, that a quantifiable definition of “commuting distance” is included in their organization’s policy guidance on flexible working arrangements, for headquarters and field duty stations, in order to improve compliance with the exigencies of service provision. The executive heads should ensure that the commuting distance for field duty stations is established and reviewed, as appropriate, in close cooperation with all United Nations system entities physically present at the country level, under the auspices of the resident coordinators.

26. Not all organizations support this recommendation.

27. While there is some support for the establishment of a more coherent approach among United Nations organizations at the country level to help ensure that staff members are treated equally when it comes to commuting distance and time, the definition of “commuting distance” across all duty stations is not possible given that it is often defined at the country level and may be mandated by the host countries. Some organizations, however, note the importance of consistency within the duty station. Rather than focusing on a definition, the emphasis should be on the ability of staff members who avail themselves of telecommuting arrangements to physically report to the workplace premises on short notice if required to do so. In that regard, several organizations remain satisfied with using this as a guiding criterion.

28. Some organizations note that the burden of monitoring where staff members live seems greater than the benefit that such monitoring would provide. Attempts to include a commuting distance in existing policies and enterprise resource planning systems has proved cumbersome, and the benefits are unclear given that the concept is extremely relative.

29. Commuting distance is used in various contexts, not only for flexible work arrangements. For instance, in the Secretariat, in accordance with the administrative instruction on rental subsidies and deductions (ST/AI/2018/3): “The commuting distance at duty stations should be established by the local administrative or human resources offices by taking into account the local conditions at the duty station. In New York, the reasonable commuting distance shall be a 50-mile radius from the United Nations Headquarters premises”.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should review, by 2025, the management systems and tools related to data collection and analysis of flexible working arrangements and ensure that they are upgraded as necessary and fit for purpose, in order to support data-driven and effective management of flexible working arrangements.

30. Organizations support this recommendation.

31. Organizations agree with the importance of monitoring the implementation of their flexible work policy and of regularly reviewing possible improvements of systems used for that data collection. Some mention the fact that organizational priorities and resource constraints may affect the extent of upgrades that can be implemented within the specified time frame.

32. It is noted that this recommendation is related to recommendation 2.

Recommendation 7

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should request the Human Resources Network of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination to establish a working group to develop, by the end of 2026, harmonized criteria for determining the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station and for adjusting the entitlements and benefits, should such teleworking be used beyond the established maximum duration, with a view to achieving system-wide coherence.

33. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to the Secretary-General in his capacity as Chair of CEB.

34. While supportive of system-wide coordination initiatives, organizations consider that it would be more appropriate to target such efforts at providing strategic guidance rather than establishing prescriptive criteria on operational-level subjects such as maximum duration of teleworking outside of the duty station, which are better suited to remaining under the accountability and prerogative of the executive heads, based on the different mandates, structure and operational context of each organization.

35. Organizations note that flexible working modalities, including, in particular, teleworking outside duty stations, are usually work arrangements that are individually agreed upon within the context of the exigencies of service, depending significantly on organizational mandates, service delivery and specific job profiles. The applicable adjustments of entitlements and benefits in cases where such arrangements are granted on an individual basis are already under discussion in the ongoing ICSC compensation review; hence, not all organizations share the view that a dedicated Human Resources Network working group on such matters is needed.

36. As such, narrowing the focus to establishing one-size-fits-all criteria on an operational topic would be a missed opportunity to develop truly impactful high-level

strategic guidance, which can be achieved only through cooperation at the United Nations common system level.

37. Organizations raise concerns about paragraph 162 of the JIU report and table 22, in which there are factual errors on the adjustments of entitlements currently in effect in some organizations and in which no distinction is made regarding which entitlement(s) or benefit(s) were examined. While agreeing that the proposed harmonized criteria are a topic for discussion for a possible working group, one organization stresses that such discussion should be undertaken at the level of the particular benefit or entitlement in question, looking closely at its purpose and intention and whether physical presence plays an important role in determining eligibility, rather than having an overarching discussion relating to teleworking outside the duty station.

Recommendation 8

The General Assembly should consider, by its eighty-second session, the proposals of the Secretary-General regarding harmonized criteria, within the current United Nations common system framework, for determining the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station and for adjusting the entitlements and benefits, should such teleworking be used beyond the established maximum duration.

38. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the General Assembly.

39. Organizations note that because this recommendation is related to recommendation 7, reference should be made to the comments contained in paragraphs 33 to 37 above and emphasize that system-wide efforts are best addressed through strategic guidance rather than through prescriptive operational criteria. They believe that decisions on topics such as the maximum duration of teleworking outside duty stations are best left to the executive heads of organizations, given the diverse mandates, structures and operational contexts across the system.

40. Lastly, it is unclear how the proposed recommendation would fit the existing governance framework, given that the Secretary-General and the General Assembly have no formal authority over the human resources policy choices in specialized agencies, while compensation-related aspects would have to be handled according to the applicable United Nations common system framework (i.e., through the ICSC mechanisms).

Recommendation 9

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should request the High-level Committee on Management of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination to consider requesting the participating organizations to present, starting in 2026, voluntary periodic reports, ideally on a triennial basis, on the implementation of the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work, in order to maximize its benefits and promote system-wide coherence, including through sharing related experiences, challenges, achievements and innovative good practices.

41. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the Secretary-General in his capacity as Chair of CEB. However, not all organizations support this recommendation.

42. Organizations point out that the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work is an umbrella concept under which individual internal policies are developed in the respective organizations. Some are of the view that there is no direct

“implementation” of this policy to report on, while others are of the view that reporting should be done only on an informal basis through consultations rather than formalized reporting mechanisms.

43. The flexible working arrangements are a unique element in each organization’s human resources strategy that is subject to each organization’s specific needs, type of workforce, structure (number of staff, field presence) and mandate (including the nature of its activities and missions, some of which may be more easily compatible with flexible working arrangements than others). Nevertheless, organizations support the continued sharing of good practices in the area of flexible working arrangements through the High-level Committee on Management of CEB, to support harmonization, where feasible.

44. Some organizations underscore that such presentations would add value only when meaningful indicators at the United Nations common system level are developed and agreed upon to measure the strategic impact, assumed benefits and unintended consequences of flexible work in a coherent manner across the system, so that such high-level discussions are focused on value creation rather than counting activities.
