



ARTICLE 14 - JIU60

Five decades of JIU oversight of environmental initiatives across the United Nations system

This article is part of a series commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations system highlighting its mandate, evolution and contribution to the United Nations system over the last six decades.

“ *The true measure of environmental oversight is not the policies we write, but whether global commitments translate into accountable, field-level practice across every UN entity* ”



Toshiya Hoshino
Inspector

As the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) marks its 60th anniversary, its longstanding work on environmental issues offers an opportunity to reflect on the contribution of independent system-wide oversight to environmental governance and sustainability across the United Nations system. Since 1979, from early reviews of conservation programmes and field-level environmental initiatives to more recent assessments of climate-related activities, environmental governance and sustainability in internal operations, the JIU has repeatedly identified common challenges: fragmented institutional arrangements, unclear accountability, inconsistent resource tracking and gaps between global commitments and operational practice. Many of these issues continue to shape discussions on United Nations reform, including under the UN80 initiative.

JIU contributions at a glance

Drawing on its unique system-wide mandate, the JIU has examined environmental challenges that cut across many UN system organizations, identifying common obstacles and good practices. Its reviews have addressed topics including:

- Making environmental sustainability part of internal management, from procurement and travel to buildings and conferences.
- Strengthening international environmental governance and support for multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs)
- Tracking climate-related activities and resources consistently across the system.
- Integrating disaster risk reduction into corporate strategies and country-level planning.

- Bridging the gap between global water policies and field projects that reach local communities.
- Supporting heritage and wildlife conservation through regional cooperation and training.

Taken together, these reviews show how independent oversight can help the UN system turn environmental commitments into coherent and accountable practice.

Environmental sustainability in internal operations

2019–2020: Mainstreaming environmental considerations
Disaster risk reduction, internal environmental sustainability, organizational policies, leadership and accountability.

As custodian of the main environmental conventions, the UN system should be seen to practice internally what it preaches to the outside world. Two JIU reviews, ten years apart, examined whether it does.

Environmental profile of the UN system (2010): The JIU reviewed the in-house environmental policies and practices of UN system organizations, from energy use and procurement to buildings and waste management. It found many promising initiatives, notably under the climate-neutral initiative launched in 2007. However, these were developed piecemeal, without a systematic framework or senior-level leadership. The JIU recommended common guidelines for in-house environmental management systems adapted to each organization. It also called for an internal mechanism to offset unavoidable emissions and for host country support in greening UN premises.

Mainstreaming environmental sustainability (2020): A decade later, the JIU found that UN entities had not paid adequate attention to environmental sustainability in their internal management, leaving action largely to individual initiatives. With no system-wide standards or benchmarks, practices varied between headquarters and the field. Only 56 per cent of the 2010 recommendations had been accepted.

The JIU recommended that each organization adopt an environmental sustainability policy, provide for its implementation in budget plans and report the results to its governing bodies. It further called for sustainability considerations to be incorporated into procurement, recruitment and performance appraisal, for conferences to become paper-smart, and for information technology emissions to be aligned with the Paris Agreement.

Evidence of follow-up and institutional change

The JIU reviews were followed by developments at both the system-wide and organizational levels. In 2019, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination endorsed the *Strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system, 2020–2030, Phase I: Environmental sustainability in the area of management*, establishing a common framework for reducing environmental impacts and integrating sustainability considerations into corporate management decisions. This development was reported by the United Nations in its follow-up to the JIU's 2010 review.

Following the 2020 review, organizations also reported concrete policy developments. For example, WIPO issued a High-Level Policy on Environmental Responsibility in December 2022, while UNHCR introduced a new environmental policy in April 2023 covering buildings, facilities, fleet and travel. These examples illustrate how environmental sustainability has increasingly been incorporated into organizational management frameworks, reflecting the priorities emphasized in successive JIU reviews.

Viewed together, these two reviews and the subsequent developments highlighted the importance of common frameworks, organizational policies, dedicated resources, committed leadership and regular reporting to Member States. They also illustrated the continuing challenge of translating system-wide sustainability commitments into consistent practices across organizations. The same need for clear roles and accountability runs through the JIU's work on environmental governance.

Strengthening environmental governance

2008–2015: Environmental governance and system-wide coordination

Institutional fragmentation, mandates, environmental financing, resource tracking and climate-related activities.

International environmental governance involves many actors, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), development agencies and the secretariats of numerous MEAs. Three JIU reviews examined their governance arrangements and coordination.

Environmental governance (2008): The JIU found that environmental governance in the UN system was weakened by institutional fragmentation and the lack of a holistic approach. There was no single system-wide planning framework, and responsibilities were unclear. The JIU recommended that the General Assembly establish a clear division of labour among development agencies, UNEP and MEAs.

Post-Rio+20 environmental governance (2014): After the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), the JIU revisited the subject and the follow-up to its 2008 recommendations. It noted real progress, including the creation of the UN Environment Assembly with provisions for universal membership and closer cooperation among related conventions. However, most of the 2008 findings remained valid. Resources for environmental activities had grown from US\$1.8 billion in 2006 to US\$4.0 billion in 2012, yet there was a lack of reliable reporting on their use. The JIU recommended regular system-wide reporting on environmental activities, common norms and accounting guidelines, and stronger environmental expertise within United Nations country teams.

Global Mechanism of the UNCCD (2009): At the request of the Conference of the Parties, the JIU assessed the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which helps mobilize funding for the Convention. It found that the Mechanism's broad mandate and indirect reporting line through its host institution had resulted in overlaps with the Convention secretariat. The JIU called for a clearer division of tasks, greater transparency and clearer lines of accountability.

Together, these reviews showed that coherent governance depends on a clear division of labour, transparent use of resources and direct accountability to Member States. These lessons apply equally to climate change and disaster risk, where many organizations contribute within their own mandates.

Climate change and disaster risk reduction

Climate change and disaster risk affect almost every area of the UN system's work. Two JIU reviews examined how the system coordinates its efforts and tracks the resources involved.

Climate change activities and resources (2015): Prepared ahead of the 2015 Paris climate conference (COP21), this review mapped climate-related work across UN organizations and convention secretariats. Reported spending had grown from about US\$784 million in 2008–2009 to US\$1.4 billion in 2012–2013. However, there was no agreed definition of climate finance and no common tracking method, which made system-wide planning and accountability difficult.

The JIU recommended a long-term system-wide climate change strategy and common methods for tracking climate funding and activities. It also called for support for technology transfer and for climate change to be built into country-level planning.

Disaster risk reduction (2019): The JIU reviewed how UN system organizations were integrating disaster risk reduction into their work, in support of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Most organizations had incorporated disaster risk reduction into their strategic plans, often as part of broader work on poverty, health, cities and climate change. However, organizations used different indicators, making system-wide reporting difficult. The JIU recommended that governing bodies ask their organizations to map how their mandates relate to disaster risk reduction. It also called for disaster risk reduction to be systematically incorporated into the new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and supported by dedicated capacity in UN country teams.

Together, these reviews showed that common definitions, consistent reporting and country-level integration are needed for a coherent UN system response. These concerns have deep roots in the JIU's earlier work.

Early foundations (1979-2002)

1979–2002: Conservation and operational effectiveness
Regional conservation, national capacity, environmental considerations in development projects and the link between global policies and local beneficiaries.

Well before environmental sustainability became a central global priority, the JIU examined how the UN system supported conservation and environmental management in developing countries.

Heritage conservation in Latin America (1982) and Asia and the Pacific (1983): These regional reviews assessed UN support for protected areas, wildlife and cultural monuments. UN inputs were small compared with needs, but their catalytic role had produced results. The reviews recommended regional strategies, training to build national expertise and closer cooperation among developing countries.

African wildlife management (1979, 1983): The JIU reviewed the regional wildlife colleges at Mweka (United Republic of Tanzania) and Garoua (Cameroon), which it considered a successful example of regional cooperation. Its 1983 progress report found that implementation of its earlier recommendations had been piecemeal, probably because no UN organization had been designated to lead identified support efforts.

Environmental focus of UNDP projects (1991): At the request of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the JIU assessed how far UN-funded projects took environmental factors into account, from design to evaluation. Ahead of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, it recommended that integrating the environment into development become a permanent item on the agenda of UN organizations.

Water projects and end-beneficiaries (2002): Drawing on case studies in Madagascar and Zambia, the JIU found a gap between the UN system's normative work on water and its field operations, which limited the benefits reaching local communities. It recommended a shared database of water projects, common guidelines and country-level water committees.

These early reviews connected conservation and development while emphasizing national capacity and regional cooperation. The gaps they identified, between policy and field operations and between recommendations and their implementation, would recur in later JIU work.

Three overarching lessons

- 1. **Environmental governance requires more than institutional commitments.** Clear mandates, defined responsibilities, adequate resources and accountable leadership are needed to translate commitments into organizational practice.
- 2. **System-wide coherence depends on comparable information.** The repeated findings concerning inconsistent definitions, reporting and resource tracking demonstrate the importance of common standards for effective coordination and accountability.
- 3. **Implementation and follow-up remain essential.** The recurrence of similar findings across successive JIU reviews suggests that identifying weaknesses and making recommendations are not sufficient in themselves. Sustained organizational and governing-body ownership are necessary to translate oversight findings into improvements.

Looking ahead

Nearly five decades of JIU reviews of environmental initiatives reveal a consistent set of challenges across the United Nations system: fragmented institutional arrangements, unclear responsibilities, inconsistent information and reporting, and gaps between policy commitments and operational practice.

From early conservation programmes to environmental governance, climate-related activities, disaster risk reduction and the sustainability of internal operations, the JIU has contributed independent assessments, comparative analysis and recommendations aimed at strengthening coordination, accountability and institutional effectiveness.

The recurrence of similar findings across successive reviews also highlights an important lesson: identifying institutional weaknesses is only the first step. Translating oversight recommendations into meaningful and sustained improvements requires organizational ownership, adequate resources, clear accountability and continued follow-up by management and governing bodies.

As the United Nations system addresses the three planetary environmental crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, while pursuing broader institutional reform, these lessons remain highly relevant. Fiscal pressures and growing expectations for results place an increasing premium on coherence, reliable data and transparent resource tracking. As reform discussions continue under initiatives such as UN80, the JIU's system-wide perspective can continue to support organizational learning, identify opportunities for greater coherence and provide Member States and United Nations organizations with independent evidence to inform more effective and accountable action.

Year	Review title	Reference
2020	Review of mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system	JIU/REP/2020/8
2019	Review of the integration of disaster risk reduction in the work of the United Nations system in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	JIU/REP/2019/3
2015	Review of activities and resources devoted to address climate change in the United Nations system organizations	JIU/REP/2015/5
2014	Post-Rio+20 review of environmental governance within the United Nations system	JIU/REP/2014/4
2010	Environmental profile of the United Nations system organizations: Review of their in-house environmental management policies and practices	JIU/REP/2010/1
2009	Assessment of the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification	JIU/REP/2009/4
2008	Management review of environmental governance within the United Nations system	JIU/REP/2008/3
2002	Extension of water-related technical cooperation projects to end-beneficiaries: bridging the gap between the normative and the operational in the United Nations system	JIU/REP/2002/4
1991	Assessment of the environmental focus of projects financed by the United Nations Development Programme and other United Nations agencies	JIU/REP/91/2
1983	Contribution of the United Nations system to conservation and management of cultural and natural heritage in Asia and the Pacific	JIU/REP/83/10
1983	Progress report on the implementation of recommendations on regional programmes in the conservation and management of African wildlife	JIU/REP/83/3
1982	Contribution of the United Nations system to the conservation and management of Latin America cultural and natural heritage	JIU/REP/82/5
1979	Report on regional training programmes in African wildlife management at Mweka and Garoua	JIU/REP/79/1