



### ARTICLE 4 - JIU60

# Six decades of the JIU through the eyes of its Former Executive Secretaries

*This article is part of a series commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> 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.*

For the fourth article of the 60th anniversary series, the JIU offers a look back at the institution’s evolution through the perspectives of the two predecessors of our current Executive Secretary, Mika Tapio. We spoke with Susanne Frueh, who served as Executive Secretary from 2009 to 2014, and Uren Pillay, who held the position from 2016 to 2025. Both reflected on how the JIU has transformed over the years and shared their insights on the challenges and progress that have shaped the Unit’s trajectory.

**When you first took up your role as Executive Secretary, what struck you most about the JIU - either as an institution or as a team?**



Susanne Frueh

“I was struck by the strong mandate of the JIU and that it was ahead of its time when it was first established. It is unique in many ways, including the fact that the Inspectors and the staff are knowledge holders on what is going on across the UN system.”



Uren Pillay

“I had interacted with the JIU before joining – mainly through my role as Special Assistant to the USG for OIOS – so I was familiar with the Unit and its place within the UN’s oversight framework. Upon joining and viewing the Unit from the inside, I encountered significant scope to enhance the collaboration and co-operation between JIU Secretariat staff and Inspectors on issues affecting the Unit as a whole, which is a necessary prerequisite to further a shared vision and collective goals to advance the work of the Unit. Also, given the breadth of the JIU’s mandate, it became obvious to me right from the start of my tenure that the number of staff in the Secretariat who were directly supporting the Inspectors, i.e., Evaluation and Inspection Officers and Research Assistants, was limited.”

**During your tenure, what did you see as the core responsibilities of the Executive Secretary in supporting the Inspectors and safeguarding the JIU’s independence?**



Susanne Frueh

“The core responsibility of the Executive Secretary is to support the Inspectors and to ensure that the team assigned to the Inspectors is up to the task.

Sometimes teams needed more support – for example, by keeping a pulse on the work. Resource constraints were already quite severe, and a lot of time was spent on deciding how to allocate the limited remaining resources. I looked for additional resources, e.g., through building a Junior Professional Programme, a thriving research internship programme and fundraising activities. However, the most interesting role of the Executive Secretary is to ensure that reports are based on sound evidence and are analytically robust. I appreciated the opportunity to be an active member of the collective wisdom sessions, which were basically peer reviews of the draft reports. Where desired, I engaged more directly with a topic during a team’s work, in particular where I had a relevant professional background and expertise, e.g., on evaluation and risk management. During my time, the first evaluation guidelines of the Unit were finalized by an open-ended working group of the Inspectors. We also developed the first JIU recommendation tracking system, which enhanced communications efforts and publications, and engaged Inspectors in meetings of participating organizations and their boards. Additionally, safeguarding independence is a paramount aspect of the position. While the Executive Secretary formally reports to the Secretary-General, the independence, as enshrined in the Statute, must be preserved at all times.”



Uren Pillay

“With a deeper grasp of the Statute and its provisions, I recognised that adaptation was essential; changing the Statute was simply not an option. My attention turned to how the Secretariat could most effectively support the Inspectors’ work. In this process, I acknowledged that my responsibilities were highly visible in managing staff, budgets and operations, yet largely unseen when providing advice, technical support, quality assurance and assistance to the Chair and the Vice-Chair. At times, it felt as though I was supporting 11 Inspectors individually, each with unique expectations. This experience underscored the importance of impartiality – success depended on being perceived as treating every Inspector equally. Over time, trust grew, particularly between me and the Inspectors. This evolution made my role more engaging and rewarding, allowing me to contribute meaningfully to the Unit’s strategic and procedural direction.”

**Independence is central to the JIU's mandate. From your respective experiences, what practical steps are most important to protect the Unit's credibility in a complex political and institutional environment?**



Susanne Frueh

"Independence without credibility is meaningless. The Unit's work has to be credible, building on solid analysis and judgment. Inspectors and staff need to keep abreast of the evolving political and institutional environments, for example, by engaging in intra UN fora. As for practical steps, the JIU developed its own professional guidance for its work, and this – over time – improved the quality and the credibility of the reports. Another practical step is improved outreach and communications and dialogue with key actors, including other oversight actors. The JIU and the Executive Secretary's engagement with professional networks, e.g., UNEG, UNRIAS, RIAS, UNRIS and donor oversight bodies, e.g., the Geneva Network, MOPAN, if done well, also enhances the credibility of the Unit."



Uren Pillay

"The Unit's Statute adopted in 1976 and effective in 1978 remains largely relevant and valid. Its independence is anchored in key statutory provisions. Yet, it would be naïve to assume that every aspect of the Statute retains its relevance in today's environment. However, it is clear that accountability, efficiency and measurable impact have become central priorities for organisations, including oversight bodies. The JIU must continue to demonstrate its value through its outputs, operate with greater agility and ensure its media and dissemination efforts are innovative and easily accessible."

**Over your combined years at the JIU, how has the UN system changed, and what new challenges has this created for system-wide oversight?**



Susanne Frueh

"During my time at the JIU, the initiative of the UN to create a system-wide evaluation mechanism was initiated. Initially, it was seen as possibly competing with the JIU's mandate, but it became clear that there exists the space and the need for both. In this spirit, the JIU, through its Secretariat, engaged in discussions on the new mechanism. There was also a growing sense in UN agencies that there were too many oversight actors, and an oversight fatigue became quite evident. UN entities face a multitude of oversight actors, including increasingly from donor oversight offices or mechanisms. We tried to address that with increased coordination with other oversight actors, while maintaining the JIU's independence to choose the topics that it believes are important. Work planning was also improved, so as to make it a more consultative and informed process."



Uren Pillay

"The most marked change that I saw in my tenure in the UN is the increased scrutiny and operational engagement of organisations by legislative organs and governing bodies. The value and impact of organisations are being scrutinised more closely.

Organisations' resources are under tremendous pressure, forcing them to make choices that may expose them to greater risk in order to continue delivering upon their mandates. I believe that system-wide services can deliver better value for money and achieve economies of scale in doing so – I will include oversight among these services."

**During your tenure, what were the main challenges in ensuring that JIU recommendations were taken seriously and acted upon?**



Susanne Frueh

"Recommendations did not apply to all participating organizations alike, and we had to learn to better nuance the recommendations and recognize where recommendations were simply not applicable to a participating organization, either because they were too small or they had already addressed the matter. Some organizations did not pay enough attention to the recommendations and did not act on them. The web-based recommendation tracking system and increased engagement with boards and audit committees helped address this challenge. But, as we found out, the information entered by participating organizations did not always provide the full story – we simply lacked the time to verify all responses. Apart from just tracking implementation, more work would also be needed to report on results. While the web-based tracking tool had this option, it was rarely used. Following up on the results of earlier JIU work (e.g., the landmark report on oversight lacunae) or a focused follow-up as part of the single-organization Management and Administrative Reviews could provide more information on results achieved."



Uren Pillay

"The JIU executes its mandate by undertaking reviews of areas and topics that are relevant, important and prioritised by its participating organisations. Recommendations are issued to drive action and change, aiming for measurable improvement. Acceptance of these recommendations should be viewed as a commitment by the organisation to implement them. Legislative organs and governing bodies must hold management – not the JIU – accountable for implementation. Notably, progress has been made as legislative organs increasingly consider JIU reports and seek updates from management on the status of implementation. However, the General Assembly, in its 59th session, supported the UN Secretariat's proposal for the Secretary-General to cease providing an annual report on the status of JIU recommendations. This decision warrants reconsideration, as aligning the General Assembly with other UN system organisations would ensure legislative organs continue to hold management accountable for implementing JIU recommendations."

**The JIU has undergone several reforms, self-assessments and strategic shifts over the years. How important is internal change for maintaining external relevance?**



Susanne Frueh

“This is super important. There were ongoing efforts to reform internally when I joined. During my time, the JIU underwent its first self-assessment (based on a staff survey and interviews), followed by a peer review. It was not an easy process, but it resulted in many good suggestions. In the long run, it was an eye-opener about the need for understanding perceptions and the need for reform.”



Uren Pillay

“Actually – “external relevance” must be the driver for internal change if the Unit’s results are to influence how it is perceived. Without a strong link to external impact, the effort on internal changes risks consuming time and resources on actions that fail to advance the Unit’s objectives.”

**Communication and digital tools have taken on greater importance in recent years. How has this changed the way the JIU engages with and is perceived by stakeholders?**



Susanne Frueh

“Systematic outreach was critical. We started building up strategic communications efforts during my tenure, in particular with participating organizations but also with the boards. Regular visits by the chair and the Inspectors to participating organizations were very useful in this regard. Better sharing of JIU reports, including shorter summaries and news feeds and making sure they were reflected in relevant political or organizational platforms, was also seen as important. We started inviting the focal points in participating organizations for annual meetings to Geneva – this really helped to improve collaboration and understanding of each other. Regarding the Management and Administrative Reviews, early communications with the participating organization management, as well as the boards, have helped to further visibility, the relevance of the JIU and the use of reports, including earlier reports. JIU anniversaries are a great opportunity to raise the visibility of the Unit, as well as to reflect on its *raison-d’etre*. ”



Uren Pillay

“The JIU has made significant improvements in this area in recent years. While more can still be achieved with additional resources, the Unit has maximised the impact of its limited communications tools. The JIU communications strategy has been central to this progress, representing one of the most significant initiatives in promoting the Unit’s reports,

broadening their audience, demystifying the JIU and enhancing its reputation among staff in participating organisations.”

**Looking back, what is one lesson from your time as Executive Secretary that you believe remains essential for the JIU’s future?**



Susanne Frueh

“For the Unit to remain relevant, keeping your finger on the pulse of the UN system at large and of each participating organization and understanding the political and institutional factors shaping it is critical. Staying ahead of the curve through the right reports that are done with professional rigour, objectivity and clear analysis results in recommendations that improve the system-at-large.”



Uren Pillay

“One might argue that the Statute governs the JIU’s work, that Inspectors are elected officials who operate independently and autonomously and that the Secretariat exists solely to support their efforts – and this would be factually correct. However, such reasoning alone will not guarantee the attention and impact the JIU’s work deserves, nor does it reflect the dedication of both staff and Inspectors. The JIU must become a recognised “brand” – one that stands for credibility, integrity and quality oversight. To strengthen this brand, the entire Unit must genuinely embrace ownership and recognise that teamwork is essential for consistent growth and lasting impact.”

**As the JIU marks its 60th anniversary, where do you believe the Unit can add the greatest value in the years ahead?**



Susanne Frueh

“Working for an international organization outside of the UN system, I can see the continued value of the JIU in providing system-wide evidence on good practices and the need for reform. There are currently seismic shifts and fractures in the multilateral system. Independent, objective and credible system-wide oversight remains vital for distilling lessons and effecting reform. The JIU needs to be strategic about how it engages in this changed environment.”



Uren Pillay

“The JIU is uniquely positioned to concentrate on governance – encompassing roles, responsibilities, accountability, oversight and reporting. This sharper focus may result in the Unit taking on fewer operational issues centered on efficiency and effectiveness, but such responsibilities can readily be assumed by internal oversight entities as part of their risk-based approach.”