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Joint Inspection Unit

Inter-agency staff mobility and work/life balance in the 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 “Inter-agency staff mobility and work/life balance in the organizations of the United Nations system” (JIU/REP/2010/8).

Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Inter-agency staff mobility and work/life balance in the organizations of the United Nations system” seeks to assess the policies and mechanisms that regulate staff mobility and work/life balance in the United Nations system organizations. The report provides participating organizations with an independent, external assessment of the issues related to staff mobility and proposes recommendations to harmonize and enhance staff mobility and work/life balance policies and procedures.

The present note presents the views of United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided in the report. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and noted that it underscored many of the ongoing issues that were being reviewed and discussed within various human resources forums.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Inter-agency staff mobility and work/life balance in the organizations of the United Nations system” (JIU/REP/2010/8) seeks to assess the policies and mechanisms that regulate staff mobility and work/life balance in the United Nations system organizations. The report provides participating organizations with an independent, external assessment of the issues related to staff mobility and proposes recommendations to harmonize and enhance staff mobility and work/life balance policies and procedures.

II. General comments

2. Organizations of the United Nations system welcomed the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on inter-agency staff mobility and work/life balance, and noted that it underscores many of the ongoing issues that were being reviewed and discussed within various human resources forums, notably the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) and the Human Resources Network of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). Agencies also noted that the majority of the recommendations by the Joint Inspection Unit were being acted upon by entities tasked with human resource responsibilities.

3. Agencies further found that the report highlighted important facts and principles regarding inter-agency mobility, and welcomed the recognition within the report that a “one-size-fits-all” approach was not applicable to staff mobility owing to the differing operational requirements across agencies with diverse mandates. Further, they noted that the recommendations raised interesting principles and ideas regarding inter-agency mobility; however, agencies continued to have concerns regarding the feasibility of some of the recommendations in the short term, and highlighted as examples recommendations 3 (a single set of staff rules for all United Nations agencies), 6 (common contracts) and 8 (inter-agency moves).

4. Agencies agreed that dual-career support was a key consideration in their ability to attract and retain qualified staff, and that facilitating the acquisition of local work permits was only one element. Agencies suggested that another significant element in need of strengthening was the local networking among international organizations and spouses. Networking should be encouraged, supported and monitored centrally.

5. Finally, agencies also agreed that the medical services of United Nations organizations should participate more actively in the development and implementation of the relevant human resource management policies regarding staff mobility, as noted in the report.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The CEB, through its High-level Committee on Management, should agree urgently on the contents and uniform use across the United Nations system of one legal instrument to regulate staff mobility among organizations of the United Nations common system. It should also define, inter alia, the respective responsibilities of organizations with regard to the allocation of financial liabilities related to the different types of staff movements.

6. CEB members largely supported this recommendation, and noted that action had already been taken within the inter-agency mechanisms (the High-level Committee on Management, the Human Resources Network and the Legal Network) to address the challenges inherent in promoting inter-agency mobility. Agencies stressed the importance of clarifying the financial liabilities of both the releasing and receiving organizations during and beyond the inter-agency mobility, such as long-term liabilities after the movement is completed.

Recommendation 2

The CEB, through its High-level Committee on Management, should develop system-wide standards for the systematic collection, monitoring and consistent reporting of staff mobility relevant data, including inter-agency mobility and mobility internal to the respective organizations.

7. Agencies supported the concept of system-wide standards to achieve consistent reporting of staff mobility data, as called for in recommendation 2. They stressed, however, the need to ensure that these standards remain simple and do not overburden agencies with complex reporting requirements, and that they can be easily integrated into existing human resource information systems. Agencies also stressed the need to have only one central data repository responsible for collecting and analysing this type of data; currently agencies report similar data under different formats to working groups specific to ICSC, CEB and the Human Resources Network.

Recommendation 3

The CEB, through its High-level Committee on Management, should elaborate a plan of action, including specific deadlines and responsibilities, for the development of one set of common staff regulations and rules applicable to the whole United Nations common system.

8. Organizations of the United Nations system generally supported the harmonization processes, but they expressed reservations regarding recommendation 3, which called for the development of one set of common staff regulations and rules applicable to the entire United Nations common system. They noted that, overall, organizations of the common system had fairly similar staff regulations and rules but that major differences in the implementation of regulations and rules emerged through agency-specific tools such as administrative manuals, administrative instructions and guidelines where some collaboration between agencies would be useful to avoid duplication. Further, where differences in rules and regulations did exist, changing them to achieve alignment might require agreement of governing bodies, an action

outside the control of executive heads and inter-agency mechanisms such as the High-level Committee on Management.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations common system should review their internal staff mobility and/or staff rotation schemes from a system-wide perspective, in order to make them supportive, consistent and coherent with inter-agency mobility initiatives.

9. In response to recommendation 4, which called for organizations of the United Nations system to review and adapt their internal mobility schemes, many agencies highlighted that there were existing mobility practices in place intended to enhance inter-agency mobility. However, agencies noted that until the inter-agency mechanisms addressed concerns about the existing inter-agency mobility accord, any internal reviews conducted by agencies would have limited value. In addition, for some agencies, existing rotation policies were based on a statutory requirement, and therefore were not amenable to variation to meet system-wide coherence objectives.

Recommendation 5

In the context of the CEB, the executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations common system should review their internal relevant rules, with a view to granting that all vacant posts within their respective organizations are open to all United Nations staff members, including those working in other system organizations on an equal basis as those established for their own staff.

10. Agencies of the United Nations system generally supported the concept of considering applicants from other United Nations bodies on an equal basis as internal staff for all vacant posts, as called for in recommendation 5, but with reservations. Many organizations noted that existing staff rules gave preference to internal candidates for various reasons, including, for example, favoured treatment for internal staff members on abolished posts, and this consideration should remain in any future agreement. However, the issue of reciprocity remained the greatest challenge agencies faced when considering modifying staff rules to allow applicants from other United Nations agencies to compete on par with internal applicants, and some agencies have therefore established bilateral agreements that allow staff members from the two agencies to be considered as internal applicants for all vacancies. Agencies further noted that an inter-agency project was under development to open vacancies for General Service positions in the field to other United Nations common system organizations on a voluntary and reciprocal basis, focussing on functional clusters.

Recommendation 6

The CEB, through its High-level Committee on Management, should elaborate an inter-agency common system policy, including its legal framework, for new contracts and the subsequent induction of new staff joining any organization of the common system with a view to developing a common system culture.

11. Agencies of the United Nations system supported the concept of an inter-agency common policy for new contracts and the development of a common system culture through harmonized induction procedures. They noted that this issue was under review within the inter-agency human resources mechanisms. Agencies did not consider it difficult to introduce a “common culture” but emphasized, as noted in the report, that the specificity of each organization should also be recognized and maintained (e.g. the culture and practices of a humanitarian organization were likely to be different from those of an organization that focused on development issues). Agencies stressed, however, that there was much to do in the area of harmonization, and that a common culture would flourish more readily in an environment of enhanced harmonization of rules and practices.

Recommendation 7

The CEB should consider introducing new staff rotational/mobility schemes at a system-wide level and with a view to facilitating the voluntary participation of staff in humanitarian and/or peacekeeping activities.

12. Agencies supported recommendation 7 as a way to encourage inter-agency mobility. They noted that it might require human resource divisions to review existing practices and procedures regarding the release and return rights of staff members who participate in the mobility programme for temporary periods, and to review the available options for managers to replace staff members who are released to peacekeeping missions. Agencies also suggested that, if the intent of the recommendation is to promote mobility by creating an inter-agency roster of qualified staff to be deployed in emergencies, such a roster would need to be coordinated between the different emergency response mechanisms of each organization.

Recommendation 8

The CEB should consider introducing new inter-agency staff mobility initiatives at a system-wide level based on the concept of common and specific occupational networks.

13. Agencies supported this recommendation and expressed a willingness to explore the concept of exchanges of staff encumbering the same or similar posts at the same level in two different organizations within occupational groups. While the actual implementation details would need to be developed (for example regarding the level of remuneration and the costs of relocation if the two organizations are not in the same duty stations), agencies viewed such exchanges as beneficial to both the staff members and the organizations.

Recommendation 9

The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations common system should bring to the attention of the host countries' authorities the need to facilitate the access to local labour markets for the spouses of staff members of international organizations, through, inter alia, the granting of work permits or similar arrangements.

14. Agencies strongly supported the call in recommendation 9 for enhanced access to labour markets for spouses of staff members of international organizations. Agencies noted that Italy was selected to be one of two pilot duty stations for the implementation of the joint negotiation approach, proposed by the Dual Career and Staff Mobility programme, for agreements with the host Government on the granting of labour permits to spouses. Agencies also noted that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations was designated as lead agency to negotiate with national authorities on behalf of organizations based in Rome and Italy regarding the possibility of and modalities to grant work permits to United Nations spouses. Agencies also suggested, however, that unless a new international obligation was established — for instance by modifying the general conventions on privileges and immunities of staff members of the United Nations and its specialized agencies — legislative bodies would have no authority to request individual member States to adapt their internal legal systems to suit the mobility needs of United Nations system organizations. At best, legislative bodies could encourage or remind host countries to ease their domestic practices as a contribution to facilitating inter-agency mobility.

Recommendation 10

The executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations common system should systematically assess the performance of work/life balance programmes periodically and include, inter alia, a cost-benefit analysis of such programmes as part of their regular performance reporting.

15. Agencies welcomed the analysis of work/life balance presented in section IV of the report, with many recognizing the importance of these programmes as a factor in staff motivation and satisfaction; however, although many agencies had implemented work/life balance policy assessments, not all agencies supported, or had plans to include, a cost-benefit analysis as part of these assessments. Therefore, agencies largely took note of the recommendation, but indicated that the process of conducting a cost-benefit analysis would not be straightforward, and would have welcomed within the report some direction regarding standard criteria or key performance indicators for cost-benefit analysis of most typical work-life balance programmes.