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Joint Inspection Unit

Review of air travel policies in the United Nations system: achieving efficiency gains and cost savings and enhancing harmonization

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 air travel policies in the United Nations system: achieving efficiency gains and cost savings and enhancing harmonization” ([JIU/REP/2017/3](#)).



Summary

In its report entitled “Review of air travel policies in the United Nations system: achieving efficiency gains and cost savings and enhancing harmonization” (JIU/REP/2017/3) the Joint Inspection Unit reviewed various aspects of air travel policies, regulations and practices across the United Nations system and examined their implementation with a view to improving the management of air travel and the effective and efficient utilization of air travel resources.

The present note reflects the views of the organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by the member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Review of air travel policies in the United Nations system: achieving efficiency gains and cost savings and enhancing harmonization” (JIU/REP/2017/3) presented a review of air travel policies, rules and practices and their implementation across the organizations of the United Nations system, with a view to: enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of travel management; increasing accountability and transparency among managers who approve travel; promoting and increasing coordination and cooperation; and identifying good practices and lessons learned that may promote the harmonization of practices among all organizations of the United Nations system.

II. General comments

2. The organizations of the United Nations system commend the Joint Inspection Unit for having produced a clear, comprehensive and constructive report on air travel policies and practices across the United Nations system and consider that many of the conclusions are practical and feasible, on the understanding that no additional cost will be incurred in their implementation.

3. While the organizations appreciate the value of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, some lament that its scope is solely limited to air travel expenditures and that it does not take into account accommodation expenses, which may account for up to 75 per cent of overall travel expenses. The organizations observe that further significant savings in the area of travel will only be achieved once the current model for the administration of accommodation expenses (daily subsistence allowance system) is reviewed.

4. Concerning the methodology, some organizations note that the methodology adopted as part of the proposed recommendations is headquarters centric and does not reflect decentralized travel operations, which in some cases account for up to 80 per cent of such operations.

5. The organizations also caution against drawing conclusions from the data presented in the report, in view of the discrepancy acknowledged by the Inspector regarding the nature and scope of the data provided by the respondents.

6. Agencies and organizations not based in the United Nations Secretariat note that any proposed initiative for system-wide policy alignment should include reviewing best practices at all entities of the United Nations system, not solely within the Secretariat.

7. Lastly, the organizations consider the management of travel expenses to be primarily the responsibility of the management of the Organization, and note that in the event that a formal advisory committee on travel is established, its scope should be framed within a definition of high-level principles applicable across the United Nations system.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The legislative bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request their executive heads, who have yet to do so, to establish by 2019 a consistent percentage cost threshold below which the most direct route may be selected in lieu of the most economic route, taking into account the time thresholds

established in each organization's travel policy for the selection of the most economic routes.

8. The organizations support recommendation 1 and recognize the importance of not creating an undue burden on travellers by imposing longer itineraries, with insignificant savings, noting the importance of staff safety, health and well-being. However, the organizations deem that such a threshold does not warrant a recommendation for action by their legislative bodies as it is not a sufficiently significant policy item, and they underscore the importance of giving due consideration to harmonized time thresholds and the total cost of travel (not only airfare), implying that a cost threshold would be easier to implement.

9. It is further noted that, in the case of organizations with decentralized travel environments, potential savings may be outweighed by the increasing administrative time involved and that the use of a fixed percentage threshold could drive the cost of tickets up by 25 per cent.

Recommendation 2

The legislative bodies of all United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should abolish first class travel for all categories of staff and non-staff by January 2019 and permit its use only when business class is not available.

10. The organizations support the objective of recommendation 2, noting that it is directed at their legislative bodies, where still applicable. In this regard, it should be noted that, in accordance with paragraph 2 of General Assembly resolution [42/214](#), both the Secretary-General and the heads of delegations of the least developed countries to the regular and special sessions of the Assembly are entitled to first class travel. The Deputy Secretary-General is also entitled to first class travel, in accordance with paragraph 9 of section IV of Assembly resolution [65/268](#). Furthermore, by its resolution [37/240](#), the Assembly approved the Travel and Subsistence Regulations for the members of the International Court of Justice, which entitles them and one close relative residing with them to first class travel.

Recommendation 3

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to review Assembly resolutions [42/214](#), [45/248 A](#) and [53/214](#) and decisions [40/555](#) and [57/589](#) governing the standards of accommodation for air travel and to submit proposals by 2019 for updating and consolidating the policies, taking into consideration developments in information systems and technology, the air travel industry, as well as good practices in other United Nations system organizations.

11. Noting that it is directed to the General Assembly, the organizations support recommendation 3, observing that the scope of its implementation should also encompass the hotel industry, in addition to the air travel industry. It should also be noted that any new requirements regarding standards of accommodation for air travel should maintain flexibility for medical cases.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so should ensure by 2019 that effective measures are taken to enforce and monitor compliance with an advance purchase policy, including incorporation of advance planning rules and key performance indicators in travel policies that are regularly measured.

12. The organizations support recommendation 4, although they raise their concern with regard to the benefits of a single policy of advance purchase for all operations, noting that while an advance purchase policy can be used as a lever to maintain costs, in many instances advance-booking time frames have become redundant as a result of the introduction of fare class inventories and ticketing time limits with automatic cancellation policies of 48 and/or 72 hours.

13. The organizations note that other relevant elements must be taken into account with regard to this recommendation, including the country of departure, or the point of sale, as well as the type of travel (i.e. domestic; international) and the nature of the organization's scope of work (e.g. humanitarian; emergency) and related requirements for flexibility.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should schedule periodic monitoring and assessment to ensure conformity with their own air travel policies, conduct periodic risk assessments and identify measures for further efficiency gains by their next budgetary cycle.

14. The organizations support recommendation 5, while noting the generic nature of its formulation.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should encourage the use of online booking tools for air travel, update their travel policies with guidelines for optimal use of such tools, and consider integrating them with their existing systems by 2020.

15. The organizations generally support recommendation 6, and recognize the usefulness of online booking tools, although they endorse its implementation only in the event of proven cost-effectiveness and process efficiencies. Some organizations note that online booking tools may not be the most appropriate solution for some operations and complex flight itineraries that still require manual booking, and they raise concerns about the feasibility of implementing the recommendation by 2020. Furthermore, other organizations note that the benefits of online booking tools are maximized only when linked to enterprise resource planning systems, which have not been adopted by all United Nations system organizations as they require considerable upfront investment. Finally, small size entities with limited travel per year had a negative assessment of online booking tools as they do not yield considerable cost savings and increase compliance costs.

Recommendation 7

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General, in his capacity as the Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, to review measures to promote the harmonization of standards of accommodation for air travel applied across the United Nations system organizations, as well as expenses related to air travel for both mission and statutory travel, and to report on the results to the General Assembly during the first part of its seventy-third resumed session.

16. While organizations take note that recommendation 7 is addressed to the General Assembly, they caution against a one-size-fits-all approach and underscore that full harmonization is subject to differences in mandates, as well as in travel patterns, geographical locations, coverage rules and budgets.

Recommendation 8

The General Assembly should request the International Civil Service Commission to undertake a system-wide review of lump-sum entitlements for statutory travel focused on determining by 2019 a common methodology and percentage for its calculation that furthers harmonization, minimizes the risk of distortion and ensures equity and fairness among common system staff.

17. The organizations take note that recommendation 8 is addressed to the General Assembly, and underscore that, in the event that such review is undertaken, it should ascertain the feasibility of establishing a lump-sum for statutory travel.

Recommendation 9

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General, in his capacity as the Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, to submit a proposal on the feasibility of establishing a formal advisory committee on travel matters, for the consideration of the General Assembly during the first part of its seventy-third resumed session.

18. While the organizations take note that recommendation 9 is addressed to the General Assembly, they observe that the mandate and scope of such an advisory committee should be further detailed in the consideration of the recommendation. Furthermore, the organizations underscore their active engagement in the activities of the existing Inter-Agency Travel Network, which meets annually to discuss policy harmonization, new industry standards and cost efficiencies in travel.
