



## BUSINESS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT IN UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

*Inspector Eileen A. Cronin*  
*Inspector Victor Moraru*



### Background

Business continuity is defined as the capability of an organization to continue delivery of essential and time-critical services at acceptable predefined levels during and/or following a disruptive incident. Effective business continuity management is necessary to ensure the continuity of operations at all organizational levels as United Nations system organizations often operate in volatile environments and can be exposed to disruptions due to natural and human-made disasters. A decade ago, JIU completed its first review on business continuity in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/2011/6) which found that business continuity management was nascent at the time. Since then, the concept of organizational resilience management was introduced first with the aim of better coordinating efforts in the United Nations Secretariat. In April 2013, the General Assembly approved the organizational resilience management system proposed by the Secretary General as the emergency management framework for the United Nations. Within this framework, business continuity is identified as a key contributor to organizational resilience. In 2014, the policy on the organizational resilience management system was approved by High-Level Committee on Management and endorsed by the CEB to strengthen the resilience of each of the United Nations system organizations as well as the United Nations system community at each duty station.



### Objectives

The purpose of the review is:

- To inform legislative organs and governing bodies and respective executive heads on the status of business continuity management policies, plans, processes and practices across United Nations system organizations.
- To identify good practices and lessons learned to guide their decisions concerning ongoing and future initiatives.

As per JIU mandate, business continuity management accountability and oversight measures were examined with particular attention. Reference to the progress made during the last decade compared to the previous JIU report on this subject punctuates the narrative with specific examples. The review also analyses how business continuity management across the United Nations system operated to manage the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



### Approach & Methodology

In accordance with JIU internal standards and working procedures, the Inspectors used a range of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to ensure the consistency, validity and reliability of their findings. Information used in the preparation of the report is current as of December 2021. A desk review of the policy and guidance documents provided by the participating organizations and an examination of the General Assembly resolutions on the emergency management framework and the organizational resilience management system as well as the reports of the Secretary-General's on the progress in the implementation of these initiatives was made. The analysis of the reports of the High-Level Committee on Management provided indications about the interagency work on the development and approval of the policy of the organizational resilience management system.

A questionnaire addressed to business continuity coordinators, or their equivalent, facilitated the gathering of qualitative and quantitative information on the status of the business continuity management in each participating organization. The questionnaire included two annexes focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. Questionnaires and surveys were addressed to specialized professional audiences, including institutional risk focal points (often called "chief risk officers"), heads of oversight offices and chairs of oversight committees. A total of 49 interviews with 104 individuals from within the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, experts and the private sector were conducted. Subsequent interviews were carried out with officials responsible for risk management, oversight, HR management, safety and security, medical and counseling services in order to provide a broader organizational perspective.



# What the JIU found

## 1. More elaborated policy guidance available in 2021, but few participating organizations fully reflect all core elements of a comprehensive approach to business continuity management.

Through the analysis of the policy endorsed by CEB and the and other relevant international guidelines including existing business continuity management-related policies from participating organizations, JIU identified 11 core elements that would support a comprehensive approach to business continuity management. These elements, which cover high-level areas on the promulgation of policies as well as elements related to business continuity plans, can be contained within a larger policy framework such as one covering organizational resilience, a stand-alone policy on business continuity management and/or related guidelines. Based on validations of the elements, few participating organizations fully reflect all 11 core elements in their framework, with gaps in areas such as capturing lessons learned and applying quality assurance measures, coupled with insufficient clarity in the maintenance, exercise and review regimes for business continuity plans. An organization operating without an effective business continuity management framework runs the risk of incoherent and uncoordinated responses to disruptions thereby amplifying crises and degrading organizational resilience. The core elements should be included in the policies and guidelines covering business continuity management for a comprehensive and coherent approach.

## 2. Internal capacity to support business continuity management needs more attention and integration in reporting lines

Organizational arrangements for business continuity management point to less than a quarter of the participating organizations having a separate and distinct business continuity management function, either in the form of a

dedicated unit tasked to ensure a coordinated approach to business continuity management or a business continuity coordinator designated with a corporate role in this regard. Most participating organizations identify the coordination of business continuity management as shared with another function, such as enterprise risk management or safety and security, in some cases the duties are within the portfolio of a senior official, and generally with this approach the percentage of time devoted to this responsibility is low. The remaining organizations rely primarily on a network of focal points, distributed across units, offices and locations, to address business continuity management activities. While the use of focal points is necessary in many organizations with extensive field networks, more attention needs to be paid to their training and to defining their particular roles and responsibilities. The capacity to support business continuity management should be revisited as more frequent and prolonged disruptive incidents have the potential to become more common. In the same vein, the reporting line of the business continuity coordinator to senior management as well as the integration of business continuity management with other processes and procedures, such as enterprise risk management, may also require re-examination.

## 3. More consideration in developing business continuity plans that reflect risks and other crucial elements

As of the publication of this report, all but three participating organizations have business continuity plans in place, and all organizations with plans in place report that they maintain plans at multiple levels, including headquarters offices and field locations, where applicable. In developing and updating such plans, the involvement of and consultations with other functions can be crucial to identify available resources and potential risks. In many participating organizations, the planning process is inclusive and comprehensive, calling on

### Core elements for a comprehensive business continuity management framework and their inclusion in the business continuity management frameworks of JIU participating organizations, in number of organizations

| HIGH-LEVEL ELEMENTS FOR POLICY GUIDANCE ON BUSINESS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT   | FULLY REFLECTED | PARTIALLY REFLECTED | NOT REFLECTED |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| 1. <b>A statement defining the approach</b> to business continuity management, its scope and alignment with the organization's business model, operational requirements and objectives.                 | 17              | 5                   | 0             |
| 2. <b>Alignment with relevant UN standards</b> (and other international standards, as necessary)  | 14              | 5                   | 3             |
| 3. <b>Description of governance structure for coordination of business continuity activities</b> across organization, including the mechanism(s) for coordination in response to a disruptive incident. | 18              | 3                   | 1             |
| 4. <b>Clearly defined roles, responsibilities and reporting lines</b> for main internal stakeholders (e.g. senior management, line managers, business continuity coordinator, focal points, etc.).      | 19              | 3                   | 0             |
| 5. <b>Integration of business continuity management with other policies and processes</b> (e.g., risk management, human resources management, ICT, security and crisis management)                      | 16              | 5                   | 1             |
| 6. <b>Periodic reviewing and/or updating of the policy or policy guidelines</b> containing the core elements driving business continuity management.  | 16              | 3                   | 3             |
| 7. <b>Details of the mechanism(s) for capturing and processing lessons learned</b> (e.g., after-action reviews, internal management assessments, etc.)  | 11              | 4                   | 7             |
| 8. <b>Training and awareness on the business continuity management framework</b> (within and across the organization and to interested parties, as necessary)   | 12              | 7                   | 3             |
| <b>ELEMENTS RELATED TO BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANS</b>  |                 |                     |               |
| 9. <b>Established business continuity plans</b> at defined levels (e.g. offices, units, field offices, etc.)  | 17              | 3                   | 2             |
| 10. <b>Unit/divisional-level business continuity plans to be reviewed and quality assured at the corporate level</b>  | 13              | 6                   | 3             |
| 11. <b>Stated requirements for maintenance, exercise and review</b> of business continuity plans  | 14              | 7                   | 1             |



the experience and expertise of a variety of functions. Given the impact on the occupational health and safety of staff in the recent pandemic, the Inspectors encourage executive heads to include consultations with medical and counselling services in their business continuity planning processes. Also, the link between risk management and business continuity may require more effort to truly capitalize on its complementary potential. Regular and substantive interactions between enterprise risk management and business continuity management functions are essential for risk identification, response and management at both the strategic and operational levels, and should be facilitated and encouraged by senior leaders. As the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a real-time test for business continuity management, several officials of participating organizations acknowledged their concerns over plans that had not been updated or sufficiently tested and proved to be overly lengthy and complicated, difficult to implement and/or were not useful in responding to a particular crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Improvements in the rigor and discipline of maintenance, exercise and review practices are necessary

Provisions for maintaining, exercising and reviewing business continuity plans are essential to ensure that plans are not only updated regularly with new or emerging risks, but also serve to prepare staff and embed business continuity management as a dynamic and iterative practice. 13 organizations have established criteria to update their business continuity plans and 10 don't. Only five participating organizations had actually tested their business continuity plans prior to the period leading up to the pandemic. Lessons learned from disruptive incidents and the activation of business continuity plans can be an important contributor to organizational resilience and can better prepare an organization for future incidents. A more disciplined approach to this type of learning will require conducting reviews after each disruptive incident to gather data regarding the efficacy of the particular response and the adequacy of the business continuity plan used, as well as more comprehensive periodic management reviews to provide assessments regarding business continuity management performance. Participating organizations should also assess their approach to business continuity management training and outreach activities in order to reach personnel at multiple levels, to develop teamwork and to facilitate confidence and competence with the roles and responsibilities inherent in responding to disruptive incidents.

#### 5. Internal oversight offices should assess business continuity management in a more comprehensive way

The past ten years has seen a marked increase in internal audits related to business continuity, with 13 participating organizations reporting that their internal oversight offices have covered the topic in the last five years. However, the review showed that such examination is often limited in scope and covers only some aspects of business continuity management such as business continuity plans as part of country office audits or ICT-related recovery plans. While external auditors and audit and oversight committees have provided advice and oversight to participating organizations with regard to aspects of business continuity management, given the operational aspects of the topic as well as its linkages to other processes, internal oversight

offices are best placed to conduct comprehensive reviews of business continuity management policies and practices and should do so to capture lessons learned and good practices of their organizations, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to verify if current arrangements are fit-for-purpose going forward.

#### 6. Interagency coordination: uneven implementation of system-wide policy

The High-Level Committee on Management is tasked to monitor adherence to the policy on the organizational resilience management system. The monitoring is primarily based on the self-reporting of the key performance indicators by each participating organization. The indicators attached to the policy on the organizational resilience management system and reported on are designed to act as a proxy for an organization's compliance with and the implementation of the policy. While these indicators are not reported to the General Assembly, the policy itself calls for organizations to report to their respective legislative organs and governing bodies on the implementation of the policy. At present, this aspect lacks widespread implementation among participating organizations. In order to increase system-wide capacity in this area, the High-Level Committee on management should consider various approaches to encourage the evolution of its working group to focus its efforts on sharing good practices and leveraging other inter-agency networks and communities of practices. Additionally, the Committee is encouraged to explore how the policy on organizational resilience management system (with business continuity management as a key component) is being implemented at the field level to further its application and coordination at all levels, system-wide.

#### COVID-19 case study: good practices and early lessons learned for business continuity management



The COVID-19 pandemic has been, and continues to be, unprecedented in terms of its magnitude, duration and impact. The United Nations system was not untouched by the pandemic as it impacted both its internal operations and personnel. While the current pandemic has seriously tested business continuity management and organizational resilience of the United Nations system and its organizations, it has already provided an opportunity to gain from good practices and early lessons learned to strengthen business continuity management in the participating organizations as well as other aspects of operations going forward. Once the pandemic subsides, structured management assessments should be undertaken to determine how the organizations performed in terms of business continuity management during the various phases. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also reached United Nations system governing and legislative bodies. Only about half of the participating organizations have a dedicated business continuity plan in case of disruptive events for their governing and legislative bodies. Business continuity plans to address disruptions to governance activities including provisions for virtual meetings and decision-making are encouraged.



# What the JIU recommends

**In the past ten years, substantial progress has been made in many areas of business continuity management across the United Nations system. However, gaps in core elements in business continuity management frameworks and capacity remain and those organizations operating without effective frameworks risk incoherent and uncoordinated responses to crises. The Inspectors included six formal recommendations, of which one is directed to the legislative organs and governing bodies and five to the executive heads of the JIU participating organizations.**

**1** The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, review their business continuity management framework and ensure that the core elements identified in the present report are established and owned by relevant stakeholders to enable effective coordination of business continuity processes and practices, build coherence in their implementation and promote accountability at all levels.

**3** The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, strengthen their learning mechanisms to contribute to organizational resilience by requiring after-action reviews following disruptive incidents and periodic internal management reviews of their business continuity management frameworks.

**5** In 2023, the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should conduct an internal management assessment of the continuity of business operations during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify gaps, enablers, good practices and lessons learned and adjust policies, processes and procedures, in particular in areas such as human resources, information and communication technology management and occupational safety and health, and indicate necessary measures to better prepare for and respond to future disruptive incidents.

**2** The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, ensure that the maintenance, exercise and review components of their business continuity plans are applied through a consistent and disciplined approach to confirm that the plans remain relevant and effective.

**4** The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2024, report to their legislative organs and governing bodies on progress towards the implementation of the policy on the organizational resilience management system and its revised performance indicators, and highlight good practices and lessons learned, especially in the area of business continuity management.

**6** The legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should consider, at the earliest opportunity, the conclusions of the internal management assessment of the continuity of operations during the COVID-19 pandemic prepared by the executive heads of their respective organizations and, on that basis, take appropriate decisions to address the identified gaps and risks and to ensure continuity of business operations.



## 2021 JIU Reports

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**JIU/REP/2021/4**, Review of the management of implementing partners in United Nations system organizations

**JIU/REP/2021/3**, Cybersecurity in the United Nations system organizations and **JIU/ML/2021/1**, Management letter on securing the integrity of documents, records and archives of the United Nations system organizations

**JIU/REP/2021/2**, Review of United Nations system support for landlocked developing countries to implement the Vienna Programme of Action

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