



## REVIEW OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

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### Background

The review was initiated in response to successive requests from JIU participating organizations that had experienced the specific reality of mandatory alternate working arrangements under the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and were interested in learning how that experience could be used to enhance flexible working arrangements (FWA) and support new ways of working. FWA are voluntary adjustments to the normal working hours and/or locations, agreed between personnel and their managers in accordance with the organizations' staff regulations and rules and relevant internal policies. By virtue of their voluntary character, flexible working arrangements are initiated by the United Nations personnel. They are fully recognized within the United Nations system and adopted by organizations as a tool to better balance the professional and personal lives of their personnel.

The COVID-19 pandemic experience and lessons learned accelerated the reassessment of FWA. According to various documents by the CEB and many participating organizations, the massive deployment of teleworking as a crisis response measure amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift in the way in which work is carried out. In addition, in October 2021, the CEB HLCM endorsed the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work, which is one of the key elements identified by the CEB HLCM mandated Task Force on the Future of the United Nations Workforce for fostering an enabling organizational culture and positive employee experience. The JIU review took into account the developments that shape the new ways of working and the impact they have had on the concept of United Nations flexible working arrangements and its operationalization.



### Objectives & Purpose

The objectives of the review were to provide an assessment and comparative analysis of current FWA policies and practices in use in the United Nations system organizations, with a view to exploring areas for further improvement, identifying good

practices and lessons learned, and enhancing coherence system-wide. The purpose of the review is to inform the legislative organs, governing bodies and executive heads of JIU participating organizations about the status, utilization, and implementation of such policies and practices in the United Nations system.



### What the JIU found

**1. The emerging commitment to FWA should be acknowledged in the human resources management strategies.** FWA have been increasingly considered in the organizations' human resources management strategies. Yet, while more than a third of participating organizations included therein references to FWA, albeit general in nature, and more intend to do so in the future, this may be insufficient to make FWA a strategic management tool that could also underpin the new ways of working. Doing so is expected to support a more strategic, systematic, and structured approach to FWA, which can also support new ways of working, and would ensure that the working arrangements are aligned to and mutually support other key human resources objectives and goals.

**2. Need to optimize reporting on FWA for strategic decision-making.** Less than half of the participating organizations submit FWA-related information to legislative organs and governing bodies. Such reporting is neither an established practice nor an explicit requirement in many organizations. The reporting practices vary across organizations and the reported information is rather general, mainly including broad descriptions of how flexible working arrangements are assumed to support work-life balance, staff well-being and attracting and retaining talent. However, concrete and quantifiable data and statistics on the use of FWA in the organization as well as information on the implications of teleworking on the organization and staff at large, including the capacity to assist legislative bodies in their work, are missing. More needs to be done to ensure that the decision-making on flexible working arrangements management is data driven and evidenced based.

**3. Organizations should enhance data collection and analysis systems and tools in order to support a data-driven and effective management of FWA.** Two-thirds of participating organizations collect limited data related to the use of FWA. However, most organizations do not have an adequate capacity to regularly collect anonymized data on FWA, disaggregated by gender and other relevant dimensions, and to monitor and evaluate the implementation of FWA policies and other related internal policies. Furthermore, the organizations' analytical and reporting capacities are less than optimal. Enhancements are required for making data collection and analysis systems and tools fit for purpose, which is critical for effectively measuring the impacts of FWA on the organization and its personnel, as well as for the effective management of these arrangements, including for monitoring and accountability purposes.

**4. Organizations should gauge the impacts of the assumed benefits and unintended consequences of FWA in order to ensure that they meet the best interests of both personnel and organizations.** The United Nations system organizations share the basic assumptions about the benefits of FWA and increasingly acknowledge the unintended consequences of some FWA options, notably teleworking. The review found that there was little evidence that the assumptions about benefits, as reflected in the organizational policies, were the result of systematic assessments or hard evidence. This includes also the assumptions related to the impacts on individual and organizational productivity. Another finding is the lack of methods to assess such impacts. As organizations look towards the longer term, they will need to develop methods to gauge the impact of the assumed benefits and unintended consequences of FWA options, notably prolonged teleworking modalities, and ensure that the arrangements in place work for both the organizations and personnel.

**5. Organizations should include a generic definition of FWA in their policy guidance to clearly establish the scope of the policies and differentiate these arrangements from other forms of flexible work.** Few FWA policies contain generic definitions of flexible working arrangements and there is a lack of uniformity among definitions used for FWA options. The result is that differing sets of work arrangements are included in the FWA policy documents, some of which are not acknowledged or classified as such by all participating organizations, or some do not even constitute FWA, such as various forms of part-time employment. The definition of flexible work, provided in the United Nations System Model Policy for Flexible Work further blurred the distinction between flexible working arrangements and flexible work, as did the increased use across the United Nations system of other terms associated with the concept of flexible working arrangements, such as the various forms of work introduced as "new ways of working". The inadequate terminology and lack of generic definitions may affect the design and coherence of FWA policies and can lead to differences that are not necessarily related to the business model or size of an organization.

**6. Need for further enhancing FWA policy guidance.** Compared to the first JIU report on flexible working arrangements in 2012, the present review found that flexible working arrangement policies have become more flexible with the introduction of new options, notably teleworking modalities. While progress has been made, more could be done to further enhance the scope and content of policy guidance, including clarity of concepts introduced therein.

The report identified a set of key elements that could support a comprehensive policy design to enable effective management and operational implementation of FWA. The recommended key policy components, in addition to highlighting the high-level principles specified in the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work, propose elements such as better alignment and complementarity with other related internal policies, provision of clear, detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the flexible working arrangement options, inclusion of definitions for individual options and associated modalities, and provisions on eligibility and flexibility for implementation in different operational environments. The review found, inter alia, that most organizations do not refer to or link the definition of the concept of "duty station area" with that of "commuting distance" and that many organizations use ambiguous and/or impractical definitions for "commuting distance". The term 'commuting distance' should be defined in a quantifiable way in the FWA policy guidance, for headquarters and field duty stations, in order to ensure full compliance with the "exigencies of service" provision.

**7. Organizations should make the FWA approval process more transparent, accountable and user-friendly.** The review found that there is a high level of informality in the FWA approval process. The practice of dissuading staff from introducing a written request and instead handling requests offline can distort the perception of compliance with policy provisions. One effective way to make the approval mechanism more transparent and accountable is to eliminate the informal element from the approval process and operationalize the "permissibility to request" principle by advocating the need for a formal request as a first step in the approval process. Furthermore, organizations should avoid using unnecessary tiered approval processes for standard FWA requests and strive to further simplify the related request forms.

**8. Proactive inter-agency cooperation is key to promote system-wide coherence concerning implementation of FWA, notably teleworking.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, few attempts had been made to deal directly with FWA on a system-wide basis. The United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work is the first system-wide document covering FWA. The model policy describes various flexible work options, sets out several high-level principles and provides a harmonized framework for United Nations system organizations to build on and operationalize. However, the model policy remains silent on certain important operational aspects, including the determination of the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station, its use beyond the maximum duration and the associated impacts on remuneration, benefits and entitlements. The lack of consistent guidance or best practice models has resulted in the organizations having to pioneer their own approaches and management. A more proactive posture could be initiated within the CEB framework to consider system-wide harmonized criteria for determining the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station and for adjusting entitlements and benefits should such teleworking be allowed beyond the established maximum duration to accommodate "personal compelling circumstances", including submitting corresponding proposals to the General Assembly. Close consultation with the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) in this regard is critical.

**9. Maximizing the benefits of the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work through voluntary periodic reporting on implementation.** Monitoring is an essential part of

the implementation of any policy and a periodic analysis of implementation outcomes should be undertaken. Voluntary periodic reporting on the implementation of the model policy and sharing experiences, challenges, achievements and innovative good practices on broad issues regarding flexible working arrangements, flexible work and new ways of working could be beneficial for United Nations system organizations, inter-agency cooperation and system-wide coherence. Furthermore, voluntary periodic reporting directly to CEB High-level Committee on Management can provide an additional layer of transparency and could maximize the benefits of the model policy across the United Nations system.

**10. Mainstreaming flexible working arrangements and the new ways of work in the “new normal”.** The COVID-19 pandemic has created a “new normal” whose contours and content are being shaped by ongoing strategizing efforts across the United Nations system and by various initiatives undertaken currently by participating organizations in order to transform the United Nations workplace and workforce. Looking towards the future of work and how the workplace might be set up, it is important to have a clear understanding of what “new ways of working” are. Organizations should clearly define the new ways of working and describe their role and their relationship with enhanced flexible working arrangements as part of a broader vision set forth in their human resources strategies and other similar documents.



## What the JIU recommends

The report contains 9 formal recommendations, of which 2 are addressed to the legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations, and 7 to the executive heads of the organizations. The formal recommendations are complemented by 40 informal recommendations aimed at improving the policies, practices and operational implementation of FWA in the United Nations system organizations.

1

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure, at the earliest opportunity or in the context of established internal policy review processes, that a generic definition for flexible working arrangements is included in their organization’s policy guidance, in order to clearly establish the scope of the policy and differentiate the arrangements from other forms of flexible work.

2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should develop, by the end of 2026, methods to measure the impact of the assumed benefits and the unintended consequences of flexible working arrangements, including the effects of prolonged teleworking modalities, to ensure that the arrangements in place are in the best interests of the personnel and the organization.

3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should integrate flexible working arrangements considerations in the next iteration of their organization’s human resources management strategy, in order to ensure a strategic approach to flexible working arrangements.

4

The legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request, by the end of 2025, that the executive heads provide, as part of reporting on human resources management, periodic updates on the implementation of flexible working arrangements and teleworking policies, including statistical data, disaggregated by gender and other relevant dimensions, with a view to ensuring data-driven and evidence-based decision-making on flexible working arrangements management.

5

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure, by 2025, that a quantifiable definition of “commuting distance” is included in their organization’s policy guidance on flexible working arrangements, for headquarters and field duty stations, in order to improve compliance with the exigencies of service provision. The executive heads should ensure that the commuting distance for field duty stations is established and reviewed, as appropriate, in close cooperation with all United Nations system entities physically present at the country level, under the auspices of the resident coordinators.

6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should review, by 2025, the management systems and tools related to data collection and analysis of flexible working arrangements and ensure that they are upgraded as necessary and fit for purpose, in order to support data-driven and effective management of flexible working arrangements.

7

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), should request the Human Resources Network of CEB to establish a working group to develop, by the end of 2026, harmonized criteria for determining the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station and for adjusting the entitlements and benefits in the event that such teleworking is used beyond the established maximum duration, with a view to achieving system-wide coherence.



## What the JIU recommends (cont.)

8

The General Assembly of the United Nations should consider, by its eighty-second session, the Secretary-General's proposals regarding harmonized criteria, within the current United Nations common system framework, for determining the maximum duration of teleworking outside the duty station and for adjusting the entitlements and benefits should such teleworking be used beyond the established maximum duration.

9

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), should request the High-level Committee on Management to consider requesting the participating organizations to present, starting in 2026, voluntary periodic reports, ideally on a triennial basis, on the implementation of the United Nations System Model Policy on Flexible Work, in order to maximize its benefits and promote system-wide coherence, including through sharing related experiences, challenges, achievements and innovative good practices.

### 40 informal recommendations outlining suggestions to the executive heads for effecting further improvements

Those include the following (not exhaustive):



- The entire workforce of an organization, including non-staff personnel, should have fair and equitable access to the FWA options offered by the organization, subject to the teleworkability of functions and exigencies of service. As there is no one-size-fits-all situation when it comes to exigencies of service, personnel should be made aware of the operational requirements of the organization.



- The Inspector encourages the executive heads of the participating organizations to carefully consider the level of approval needed for standard FWA requests and to ensure that they reflect the authority and role of line managers and/or supervisors to grant FWA requests, and an organizational culture that supports flexible working arrangements in line with the policies, as well as a hybrid working environment.

- It is suggested that risk matrices outlining the typical risks associated with the implementation of flexible working arrangements be developed and incorporated into the FWA policies.



## Methodology & Approach

In accordance with the JIU internal standards, guidelines and working procedures, the Inspector used a range of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods from official and academic sources to ensure the consistency, validity and reliability of his findings. The methodology followed in preparing the report included:



**A desk review and preparation of terms of reference** in consultation with the JIU participating organizations.



**Organizational questionnaire** to 28 JIU participating organizations.



**Supplementary survey** to line managers, supervisors and first reporting officers; Internal peer review for quality assurance purposes.



**60+interviews** with over 134 officials from all 28 participating organizations and IFAD: executive managers, human resources management officers, administrative officers, medical and health professionals, and staff representatives. Additionally, interlocutors in their capacity as co-chairs of Workstream 2 of the Task Force on the Future of the United Nations Workforce or as members of the CEB Human Resource Network were also interviewed.



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