



OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS IN ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT SERVICES BY ENHANCING INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION

Inspector Jeremiah Ezra Kramer



Background

The General Assembly has often called for more cost-efficiency through the consolidation of support services at the country level. Against this backdrop, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) examined the opportunities for efficiency gains by United Nations system organizations in working together. Since the review started, the Secretary-General made far-reaching proposals for the repositioning of the United Nations development system, including a common back office and an ambitious common premises target. The JIU review provides independent insight that can help to inform the further development of this work.



Objectives and Purpose

The review was system-wide in scope, but focused on organizations with active field operations. The principal objectives were to:

- Estimate the scale of resources devoted to the delivery of administrative support services in general and at the country level;
- Draw lessons from past experience that should inform future arrangements;
- Assess the interplay between country and global level administrative support service arrangements.



9 Conclusions

1. Inter-agency cooperation offers a significant opportunity to enhance efficiency

Organizations in the United Nations (UN) development system devote significant resources to administrative support functions: roughly \$4.3 billion annually involving over 30,000 personnel, with about half the spending and two-thirds of the people at the country level. The review estimates the scale of efficiency opportunity at the country level to be in the range of \$300-500 million. The lack of consistent data and other variables make it impossible at this stage to predict what could actually be harvested in the future.

2. Accomplishment in the development of common business operations has been modest

While enhancing administrative efficiency through inter-agency cooperation has been mandated for decades, the broader trajectory has been toward the development of separate administrative support frameworks and operations, not unified service delivery.

3. Reform cannot be led from the bottom up

The onus for common business operations has been placed excessively at the country level. This has not worked. Country-level service cannot be dealt with in isolation from headquarters and vertical structures.

4. Horizontal integration at country level has not been enabled

Country level integration has not been supported by corporate policy changes to create the necessary conditions for its implementation. Key challenges include: differences in rules and procedures, a mismatch between country-level objectives and corporate support, and the different interests and capacities within UN country teams.

5. Country-level initiatives have yielded insufficient results

The Business Operations Strategy approach lacks ambition in not seeking consolidated service provision. It is based on a business case methodology that estimates savings that are not available for alternate use. Ultimately, it has generated modest levels of real savings that may not be commensurate with the burdensome level of effort involved.

Hanoi, Brasilia, Cabo Verde and Copenhagen are sometimes referred to as integrated country-level service centres. This review finds that none of these centres offer a ready template for the consolidation of common business operations at the country level. One possible exception is Cabo Verde, which illustrates an approach relevant to UN country teams with small programme volumes.

6. Bureaucratic barriers still impede cooperation

Notwithstanding longstanding efforts to harmonize rules and procedures, differences impede integrated service delivery. Mutual recognition by organizations of their respective policies and procedures as a way of overcoming these barriers is not widely applied.

Methodology



Documentation review



3 Questionnaires



208 Interviews



Secondary data analysis



Field visits to 8 Country Teams

7. The complexity of advancing common business operations should not be understated

The complexity inherent to the mix of large and small, and resident and non-resident entities with varying degrees of internal capacity is compounded by operational requirements that vary significantly. Achievement of the objective of advancing common business operations will depend heavily on (i) an evidence base to demonstrate the benefits, (ii) sustained leadership for a long-term process, and (iii) organizations' willingness to relinquish some control.

8. Diversity in the UN system should inform the strategy for common business operations

In view of the complexity of the UN system, it is not possible to advance business operations reform at the same pace for all organizations. As over 75% of administrative personnel and spending at the country level is accounted for by five organizations, this subset of organizations could lead the reform process.

9. A UN system global strategy on shared administrative support services does not exist

This gap needs to be overcome. It is necessary to frame a global strategy in which country-level "back offices" are situated. However, there has been no effort among organizations to chart a path forward on shared services at the global level.



10 Recommendations

to legislative bodies, the Secretary-General of the UN & executive heads

- 1 Identify accurately the resources devoted to administrative support functions, irrespective of funding source, and clarify how efficiency should be defined.
- 2 Develop performance indicators to drive improvement and publicly post performance.
- 3-6 Implement 4 recommendations at the country level:
 - Test more widely the Joint Office model that had been applied in Cabo Verde;
 - Overcome bureaucratic barriers through hosting arrangements that allow the rules and procedures of a single organization to be applied;
 - Designate a small lead group to develop integrated service arrangements;
 - Refocus the UNCT on a more specific productive agenda.
- 7 Formulate a proposal to apply mutual recognition as a vehicle for capacity consolidation, so as to reduce redundancy and rationalize physical presence.
- 8 Consider the capacities of UNOPS to provide services.
- 9 Review the inter-agency mechanisms for cooperation on common business operations to ensure that they provide for the articulation between global and country-level measures, clear priority setting and methods of work conducive to results.
- 10 Establish a UN system shared services board or forum to develop the business case for and the operational design of global shared services.

ABOUT THE JIU

The Joint Inspection Unit is the only independent external oversight body of the United Nations system mandated to conduct evaluations, inspections and investigations system-wide.

Visit the JIU website for more information at unjiu.org



11
Inspectors



Latest
news



2018
Programme of work



Main
thematic areas



Reports, notes
and management letters

Click to access the full report