STRENGTHENING POLICY RESEARCH UPTAKE
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
JIU/REP/2018/7

CONTEXT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its universal, holistic and integrative approach that cuts across all dimensions of sustainable development, makes collaborative actions and interdisciplinary approaches at the system-wide level, as well as relationships with other stakeholders, imperative. Adequate research uptake is essential in order to comprehend the dynamic trends in economic, social and environmental developments and to anticipate and prevent emerging challenges by channelling and supporting critical thinking in policy debates.

A double focus

Successful policy research uptake in the United Nations system depends on the convergence of both internal and external factors that contribute, during the entire research cycle, to the quality and relevance of the final products, as well as on the relationship between the suppliers and the users of research, including non-United Nations protagonists. Mapping and documenting how organizations produce policy research *internally*, in particular by determining the adequacy of quality assurance, was the first area of interest for the review. The other area of interest was the actual use by the United Nations system of the SDGs relevant research produced *externally*, by universities and other research entities.

Main findings on internal research production

Considerable variations in the way organizations comprehend and operationalize research activities.

In some decentralized organizations, the quality assurance for policy research and uptake is not consistent throughout the organization.

Research processes are not always integrated into the strategic vision of the organization.

The current monitoring frameworks for policy research uptake are not entirely suitable for capturing the use and relevance of research products.

The insufficiency of internal skills' mapping for uptake leads some organizations to seek resources externally, rather than incentivizing and training their own staff.

Research managers often follow bureaucratic imperatives rather than incentivizing staff to carry out research. Sometimes, the administrative imperatives prevail over intellectual autonomy.

All things considered, the Inspector believes that a movement towards more efficient uptake, based on a *few guiding principles and modus operandi for communication and collaboration, would lead all United Nations organizations to act as a system-wide research network*.

Academic Perspectives
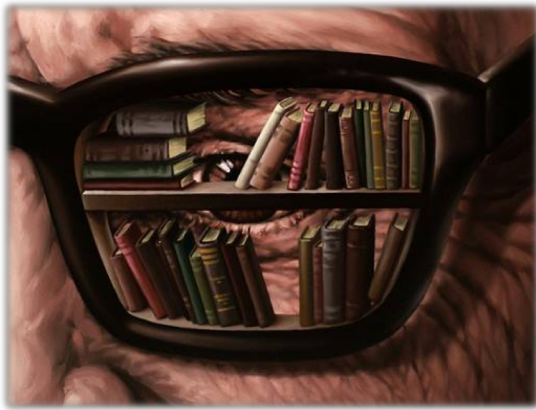
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In order to complement the findings from the participating organizations of the JIU, perspectives from academic communities were collected through a perception survey and a mini-questionnaire, which were disseminated for the Unit by five global academic networks in a praiseworthy spirit of partnership. A total of 492 researchers, university teachers and social and political scientists responded. The twin objectives of the academic consultation were to identify ways for the United Nations system to *make the best use of external knowledge resources* and to *build bridges with the academic community*.

A majority of respondents believed their access to United Nations resources were either insufficient or non-existent (46.3 per cent and 11.4 per cent, respectively), while 30.6 per cent of respondents said they had satisfactory access to United Nations interlocutors and information.

There is real interest on the part of the academic community in the 2030 Agenda and the vision behind it. A majority of respondents agreed that their organizations systematically or selectively reflected Sustainable Development Goals in their research agendas (28.8 per cent and 46.3 per cent, respectively).

However, respondents believed that their research products were far from being well used: over 60 per cent of respondents reckoned that the United Nations system had used academic research products insufficiently or not at all.

Asked about the influence of external research on United Nations decision-making and norm-setting, the majority of respondents (62.1 per cent) felt that the research had insufficient or no influence at all.

Figure XI
Use of external research by the United Nations
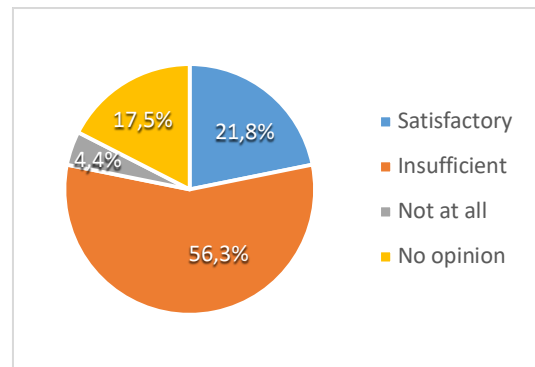
Case study: research on migration

A single topic - migration - was chosen as a thematic lens in order to illustrate a case of multidisciplinary scope of the policy research function within the broader 2030 Agenda framework.

As migration is a global, multifaceted and multi-layered issue, the Inspector thought that relevant conclusions could be useful, through projection and deconstruction, to conceptualize research needed for other complex Sustainable Development Goal areas. Such areas would have two features in common: the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and the imperative for inter-agency cooperation in research. The two criteria have been contextualized as follows:

✓ *Interdisciplinary research*, which implies that migration touches not only on the thematic mandate of some leading agencies, such as the International Organization for Migration, but also impinges on the multifaceted concerns and activities of other United Nations organizations.

✓ *Collaborative research*, which implies co-design, co-production and co-use, or at least a systematic and institutionalized process of consultation among agencies.

The Inspector formulated **twelve formal recommendations** directed at the General Assembly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Economic and Social Council, other legislative bodies, and Executive Heads.

1 The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should consider establishing, as appropriate, a minimum set of standards on research production and uptake.

2 The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations should establish, in the set-up of their programme budgets and finance systems, a means to report on the cost of research activities.

3 The Economic and Social Council should request a comprehensive review of the research agenda of the regional commissions with respect to their research priorities.

4 The Executive Heads of United Nations system organizations should carry out periodic assessments of specific research needs and of potential suppliers of research products and associated costs, with the long-term objective of strengthening internal capacities for research and making systematic use of research produced by academia.

5 The Secretary-General of the United Nations should assess the work of research and training institutes and of other United Nations system organizations.

6 The Secretary-General of the United Nations should consider establishing a system-wide policy on open data access, supporting software and research-sharing.

7 The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Executive Heads of other United Nations system organizations should stimulate capacity-building for all dimensions of the policy research functions, including research uptake at the national level.

8 The Executive Heads of the United Nations system organizations involved in the United Nations Network on Migration should instruct the relevant units to assess the options of inter-agency collaboration, on the basis of converging interests and specific competencies.

9 The governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should take measures to ensure that commitments to inter-agency collaboration, including through the establishment of a global data knowledge platform and the facilitation of academic exchanges, as stipulated in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, are implemented.

10 The General Assembly should take measures to elevate the representation and the use of policy briefs produced by the specialized research entities of the United Nations system.

11 The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director General of UNESCO should consider the creation, on an experimental and voluntary basis, of a United Nations – Academic Joint Publication Board.

12 The Secretary-General should encourage long-term partnerships with academic communities at the global, regional and national levels, and establish basic guidelines for such partnerships.

The Inspector has also addressed to Executive Heads a number of *soft recommendations* aiming to:

1. *Strengthen the functional link between research and policy development, within the organizations, at all levels, in order to facilitate relevance and efficiency in decision-making.*

2. *Consider the use of internal databases as knowledge-sharing platforms for research in order to minimize duplication and enhance opportunities for dissemination and uptake.*

3. *Make sure that contributions of policy research in decision-making are clearly enunciated with respect to each distinct category of research product.*

4. *Perform reviews of the functions of publications committees.*

5. *Consider integrating an external peer review process as a mandatory step of the policy research cycle.*

6. *Give priority to internally available capacity for the monitoring of research frameworks.*

7. *Ensure a systematic approach towards tracking and documenting progress on research uptake at the system-wide level.*

8. *Adopt a long-term vision for research that rewards the creation of new knowledge products.*

9. *Eliminate undue restrictions and conditions and encourage the staff to engage in research and publishing activities.*

10. *Seek the views of academia and engage in strategic dialogue with external researchers and research institutions.*

11. *Stimulate interested staff to write book reviews, thus disseminating the findings of research conducted by academics and researchers.*

Minimum impact expected:

- ✓ Raised awareness about the still underused potential of policy research and continued action to enhance research uptake and use in policymaking;
- ✓ Improved transparency in the use of resources during the entire research cycle;
- ✓ A minimal set of policies and rules, which would guarantee that research agenda-setting, the choice of research products and producers and quality assurance processes are conducted systematically;
- ✓ Maximized use of quality research on global issues of common interest, produced by external academic and research communities, by proactively seeking partnerships;
- ✓ More systematic forms of exchanges and partnerships with universities, research institutions and think tanks from a broader geographic area;
- ✓ Recalibration of research processes to better fit the needs of the 2030 Agenda by mainstreaming interdisciplinary and collaborative research.

THE WAY FORWARD: MAKING UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH SUSTAINABLE

Research is an activity that refuses to sit in individual boxes, despite the still-prevailing tendencies of United Nations organizations to work in silos. Future reviews of the policy research function in the United Nations system could explore in greater depth a number of issues that do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all answers:

- ✓ What are the ways and means to enhance the capacity of the United Nations system to produce relevant policy research *internally*, as a major enabling factor in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?
- ✓ What is the optimum balance between *demand-driven research*, dictated by immediate operational needs, and *anticipative research*, which should inform the strategies and visions of the United Nations organizations?
- ✓ How *autonomous* should policy research be, in terms of both organizational structures and research agenda-setting, and how should the accountability lines in all institutional configurations be drawn?
- ✓ How can the *needs of research for the 2030 Agenda* be defined, clustered and met, around themes and organizational mandates, with the collaboration of all competent organizations?
- ✓ What *institutional mixes, partnership forms or co-creation formulas* can overcome the frustrations of both academics and policymakers with the uptake of academic research?
- ✓ How to improve the abilities of researchers and research managers to *translate academic research into the policy-making language*?
- ✓ How can the *capacity of executive heads and governing bodies to absorb research* be stimulated, so as to have real political traction and influence the normative and operational contexts?
- ✓ How can *reporting lines* be improved and decision-makers be motivated to take into account trends and the changes needed, as identified by policy research?

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I WAS JUST RUBBING STICKS TOGETHER FOR FUN — I DIDN'T REALIZE I WAS DOING BASIC RESEARCH.