

Oversight in the UN system: challenges and opportunities for the Joint Inspection Unit

This article is part of an ongoing series to commemorate the Joint Inspection Unit's 50th anniversary and highlight the JIU's work and achievements over the last 50 years.

As part of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and in the context of the fourth meeting with the Focal Points from its participating organizations, the Unit organized a high-level panel to discuss the challenges it currently faces and the opportunities it may have in the future. The event, held on 21st September 2016, brought together over 120 observers including permanent representatives of Member States in Geneva, Focal Points for the JIU in the secretariats of the United Nations, Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programmes as well as officials from several Geneva-based organizations. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Corinne Momal-Vanian, Director of the Division of Conference Management at the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). The panel comprised Ms. Heidi Mendoza, Under-Secretary-General for the United Nations Office for Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), Mr. Malcom Johnson, Deputy Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Ms. Fabienne Lambert, Director of the Office of Audit and Investigation Services of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Mr. Gopinathan Achamkulangare, Chair of the Joint Inspection Unit.



The opening statements were dedicated to contextualizing the work of JIU in the United Nations system and the challenges it shares with other international oversight institutions. A clear consensus quickly emerged that an enriching, mutually beneficial relationship exists between the Unit and the United Nations system as a whole; the JIU has played an important role in contributing to the development of sound managerial practices within the United Nations family (i.e. results-based management, interview procedures in the United Nations General Assembly, the concept of “value for money” etc.). Another common theme of the discussion was to recognize how the growth of the United Nations system’s oversight universe has influenced the work of the JIU.

A major common challenge to the entire oversight architecture is that international organizations are now under unprecedented scrutiny as a result of severe budgetary constraints and increased expectations from the public for accountability and transparency. Furthermore, they are facing growing difficulties to fulfill their mandates, owing to increasing complexity and interrelationships inside and outside the system.

In this context, the JIU can play a pivotal role in helping the United Nations system to meet the objectives of coherence and coordination set by strategic plans, given its long-standing expertise in the area. However, the Unit is facing its own challenges: the growing need for specialized competences, the widening scope and new communication style of reports, the balance between its system-wide mandate and the demand for more complex projects and specific recommendations, and the competition with other oversight bodies.

Based on these considerations, the main themes addressed by the panellists included the added value of the JIU’s work, the need to position itself in the oversight universe and avoid duplication and foster coordination without contributing to “oversight fatigue”,



and enhancing the quality of interactions with participating organizations and other key stakeholders.

For example, in the case of OIOS, the JIU provides considerable added value through its reports, which are used as consultative tools aimed at developing capacities and frameworks relevant to the Office's mandate.

"...building on JIU's fraud report recommendations, the OIOS is working on fraud risk management and on developing fraud audit capacity."

Ms. H. Mendoza, OIOS

With regard to the management and administration review in the ITU, the JIU's work was crucial for the new executive management team and the report was welcomed as a way to identify areas for possible improvement and allow the new management team to undertake far-reaching changes in the Organization.

"...having someone looking at the organization from the outside was an opportunity for the new secretariat to undertake deep changes in the organization".

Mr. M. Johnson, ITU

DSG of ITU stressed that this had been made possible by the timely delivery of the evaluation, the good cooperation with the management and the staff as well as by the attentive consultation of ITU members, both private and public. In UNFPA, JIU's work is normally used as a baseline to inform the oversight activities within the Organization.

Despite the overall positive assessment of the Unit's work, some challenges were identified both by the panellists and the audience. For instance, JIU, in some ways, contributes to the overwhelming number of recommendations from various oversight bodies faced by all organizations, forcing the senior management to prioritize their acceptance, implementation, monitoring and follow-up.

"Oversight offices and JIU have different mandates, but they all exist in a sort of oversight continuum. Consequently, they need to work together".

Ms. F. Lambert, UNFPA

In addition, given the increasing number of technical issues submitted to the JIU, the Unit may need to bring on experts in addition to the inspectors and staff and target more specifically the audiences of reports. One prevalent issue was a concern raised by small participating organizations with limited resources to address the extensive requirements of the JIU to participate in all its reviews and implement all recommendations. Finally, there was a discussion on a growing need to convince internal staff of the value

of the JIU reports especially because of the limited resources of small organizations.

According to the JIU Chair who participated in the panel in his personal capacity and shared his personal perspectives, the highlighted difficulties are attributable to various factors: the way governing bodies consider the JIU reports and guide the secretariats for the implementation of JIU recommendations; implementing the JIU recommendations is a relatively slow process and the results are not immediate which is a comparative disadvantage for the JIU in the oversight universe and can give the false impression of inefficiency; the JIU has not gained resources, comparatively speaking, because of the increasing resources dedicated to other oversight bodies.

To respond to these challenges, some measures have been undertaken; however, there is still considerable room for improvement, for example, in making recommendations implementable and trackable. Another potential avenue for progress is to find something in between the current management and administration reviews and system-wide reports, and try grouping together certain types of organizations to identify common problems (large v. small organizations' reports, specialized agencies v. funds and programmes).

Finally, there is also a tendency to look inward at the JIU's POs, but it could be beneficial to look at the rest of the system and try to identify external best practices.

“JIU is one of the first victims of oversight fatigue...nevertheless, the Unit is responding to this challenge by improving efficiency and effectiveness and by addressing in its work only the topics considered as priorities by participating organizations”

Mr. G. Achamkulangare, JIU

In conclusion, the panellists were asked to elaborate on their hopes for the JIU moving forward in the next 50 years. According to the panellists, joint evaluations, more practical and implementable recommendations, greater learning from other system organizations and the private sector, strategic positioning, greater awareness of the consequences of reports are the fundamental aspects that JIU needs to consider when reflecting on its work.

*((Enhancing efficiency, effectiveness,
accountability and transparency across
the United Nations system))*
