JIU
JOINT INSPECTION UNIT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM
EXTERNAL INDEPENDENT SYSTEM-WIDE OVERSIGHT

REVIEW OF DECENTRALIZED EVALUATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

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Background

Decentralized evaluation is a key management tool that generates evidence on programme and operational effectiveness and efficiency, helping line managers demonstrate accountability, take corrective action and promote learning. Managed and approved under the authority of line management, decentralized evaluations are typically commissioned by units that are not structurally and/or administratively independent from the activities, programmes or projects being evaluated. They are commonly conducted by external consultants who are expected to act independently, exercise professional judgment without bias and comply with the applicable organizational evaluation standards.

Decentralized evaluation is a related but distinct function from centralized evaluation. While the central evaluation entity should serve as the normative custodian of evaluation by establishing standards, providing oversight and ensuring accountability across the organization, decentralized evaluations should be owned and used by line management as a management tool. Within the Institute of Internal Auditors' Three Lines Model, decentralized evaluation should ideally be positioned as a second-line function, while the central evaluation entity's independent assurance role belongs to the third line.

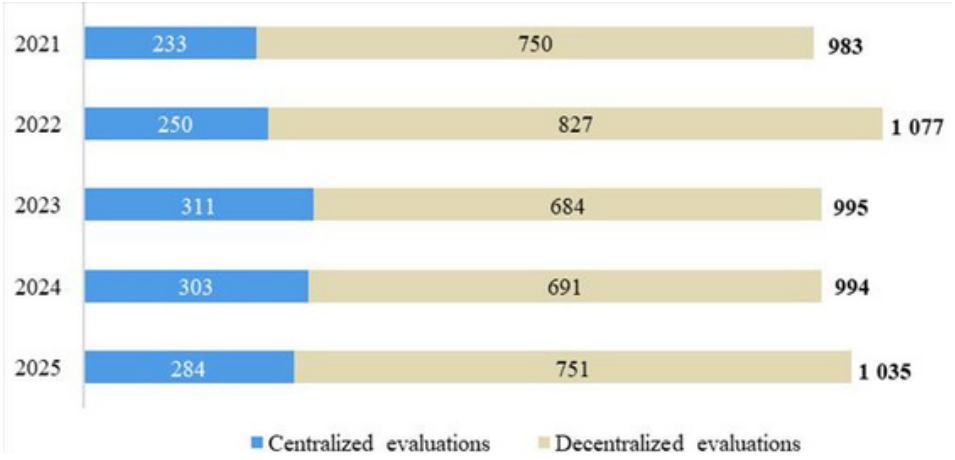
Decentralized evaluations are undertaken by 22 of the 28 JIU participating organizations and account for the majority of evaluations conducted across the United Nations system, compared with centralized evaluations conducted by central evaluation entities. Between 2021 and 2025, 18 organizations reported completing 3,703 decentralized evaluations, compared with 1,381 centralized evaluations reported by 25 organizations.

Objective and Purpose

Decentralized evaluations have expanded across United Nations organizations over the past decade. Included in the JIU programme of work for 2025, this review examines how decentralized evaluations can be strengthened to generate more credible, useful and timely evidence and contribute to a stronger culture of results, learning and accountability. Building on the 2014 JIU review of the evaluation function (JIU/REP/2014/6), it assesses institutional arrangements, resources, capacity and efficiency; the use of decentralized evaluations for accountability and learning; and the current state of centralized evaluation functions.

The review produced two outputs: a report and a supplementary analysis of centralized and decentralized evaluation in United Nations system organizations.

Number of evaluations by JIU participating organizations (2021–2025)



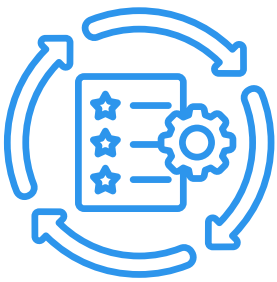
What the JIU found

In most organizations, institutional frameworks do not clearly distinguish decentralized evaluation from centralized evaluation. Unclear custodianship and uneven progress towards genuine line-management ownership further limit the maturity of the decentralized evaluation function.

Where the two functions are distinguished, decentralized evaluation generally supports operational learning and line-management accountability, while centralized evaluation addresses strategic, organization-wide issues. However, six organizations still lack a clear normative custodian for decentralized evaluation. In five organizations, central evaluation entities are mandatorily involved at key points throughout the process, while in three others their involvement is confined to specific stages. Responsibility for the entire decentralized evaluation cycle rests with commissioning units in only 14 organizations (recommendation 1). Central involvement in individual evaluations can weaken the line-management ownership that gives decentralized evaluation its distinct character as a second-line function. Organizations where central evaluation entities remain involved in key steps of decentralized evaluations therefore need a clear pathway for those entities to step back progressively from operational roles as capacity matures and to focus on setting standards and safeguarding quality (recommendation 2).

The credibility of decentralized evaluation is constrained by inconsistent safeguards for behavioral independence and uneven evaluation quality, although quality assurance systems have advanced markedly since 2014.

Because full structural independence is neither feasible nor expected for decentralized evaluations, organizations rely mainly on evaluation managers and external consultants to safeguard behavioural independence. Practices and capacity vary widely, however, and threats to independence are often subtle rather than overt, particularly where the pool of consultants is limited. Nearly all surveyed country offices considered themselves effective at protecting evaluators from undue influence, whereas central evaluation and regional entities identified less visible pressures associated with reporting lines, seniority and organizational culture.



Weak monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data and deficiencies in project design undermine evaluation quality. These issues were identified in 75 per cent of the sampled evaluations. Organizations also face a shortage of competent evaluators with local-language and contextual expertise, while evaluation management is often assigned to staff who lack dedicated time or the necessary expertise. Against this backdrop, quality assurance has advanced substantially and remains the most effective mechanism for improving evaluation quality, although adoption across organizations is still uneven (recommendation 3).

Decentralized evaluations are commissioned largely to meet policy coverage norms and donor requirements rather than to respond to genuine management demand. This compliance-driven growth is reducing their efficiency.

Among the 12 organizations that track these data, about 82 per cent of decentralized evaluations were driven by policy coverage norms and 24 per cent by donor requirements; some evaluations had both drivers. Voluntary evaluations initiated by managers remain uncommon. Without clear incentives to evaluate, line managers tend to prioritize implementation over evaluation, particularly in humanitarian settings where operational pressures are greatest.

Evaluations lose value when compliance takes precedence over utility. Mandatory terminal evaluations are rarely acted on after projects close, while potentially more useful mid-term evaluations often go unfunded because they are not required. More than half of surveyed offices therefore preferred lighter, more proportionate evaluative approaches where appropriate.

Clustered, portfolio and thematic evaluations could reduce evaluation fatigue and generate more strategic learning, but their use remains limited because planning and funding are typically tied to individual projects and donor requirements. Joint and inter-agency evaluations also remain uncommon beyond jointly implemented projects as organizations have different budgeting, contracting, approval and quality-assurance processes, and collaboration requires substantial coordination effort.

Delays, including those caused by procurement bottlenecks and difficulties in recruiting qualified evaluators, further reduce timeliness, and organizations seldom capture costs beyond consultant fees, such as staff time, making overall efficiency difficult to assess. Artificial intelligence is beginning to support data processing and quality assurance, but evidence of its impact remains limited and human oversight is still essential.

Systems for tracking and demonstrating the use of decentralized evaluations remain incomplete. When evaluations are commissioned mainly to fulfil external requirements rather than to answer management questions, organizations also tend to treat the exercise primarily as a compliance requirement instead of using the findings for learning and decision-making.

Fifteen of the 22 organizations require the public disclosure of all decentralized evaluations, and 16 require management responses. However, only 10 track the implementation of recommendations, and just nine organizations have all three elements in place (recommendation 4). These mechanisms provide a necessary foundation for accountability and use, but their existence alone does not ensure that findings inform decisions or learning.

Because decentralized evaluations are largely driven by mandatory requirements rather than intrinsic demand, engagement with findings tends to be procedural and is often limited to responding to recommendations rather than extracting broader lessons. Although self-reported use is generally moderate to high, interviewees at headquarters and regional levels were more critical, noting that evaluations are frequently produced without being substantively used.

The use of decentralized evaluations depends on a combination of factors, including leadership commitment, organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, operational capacity, timing and the actionability of recommendations. Moreover, most donors that require evaluations neither track the implementation of recommendations nor provide feedback on evaluation findings, raising questions about the value of these evaluations beyond their role as an additional assurance mechanism.

What the JIU concludes

The current model of decentralized evaluation is no longer fully fit for purpose. Coverage norms and donor expectations, rather than genuine demand for evidence, have driven growth while organizations face competing priorities and shrinking resources. Organizations are therefore producing more evaluations without necessarily answering their most important questions or consistently using the evidence generated. In this context, efficiency cannot be separated from utility.

This challenge is increasingly urgent. As confidence in multilateral institutions declines and resources shrink, organizations need high-quality evaluative evidence to demonstrate their relevance and results. Artificial intelligence may reshape evaluation practice, but effective human oversight remains essential.

No single number of evaluations or level of spending is optimal. An evaluation is justified only when its expected value warrants the resources invested. Organizations should therefore periodically assess evaluation requirements for usefulness and compare them with more proportionate alternatives (recommendations 5 and 6).



Approach & Methodology

The review combined qualitative and quantitative methods and drew on diverse sources to strengthen the consistency, validity and reliability of its findings. Data and evidence were collected between 1 May 2025 and 31 March 2026 using the following methods:

An extensive desk review and in-depth comparative analysis of relevant documentation, including evaluation and related policies, annual reports, manuals and guidelines, peer reviews of evaluation functions, and sampled decentralized evaluation reports.

A corporate questionnaire to collect data on centralized and decentralized evaluations.

A total of 110 semi-structured interviews with 215 representatives of participating organizations and external stakeholders.

An online survey of country offices in 13 participating organizations across 20 countries, which received 146 responses, representing an approximate response rate of 60 per cent.



What the JIU recommends
(formal recommendations)

Six formal and eleven informal recommendations are issued to strengthen decentralized evaluation as an organizational function that promotes operational and programmatic accountability and learning for line management.

Formal recommendations addressed to the executive heads:

1 By the end of 2027, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should review their policies to include: (a) a clear definition of decentralized evaluation within their accountability frameworks; (b) the designation of a normative custodian of decentralized evaluations; and (c) a delineation of the roles and responsibilities for all key phases of decentralized evaluations.

2 By the end of 2028, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should develop an approach for strengthening decentralized evaluation as a mature second line function, encompassing governance arrangements, quality standards, dedicated resourcing, guidance materials and capacity-building measures.

3 By the end of 2028, executive heads of UN system organizations should operationalize quality standards and assurance mechanisms for decentralized evaluations.

4 By the end of 2028, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that all decentralized evaluation reports are publicly disclosed to the extent possible, that management responses are required and that implementation of recommendations is systematically tracked, so that evaluations can fully serve as instruments of accountability, learning and organizational improvement.

5 By the end of 2029, executive heads of participating organizations should commission an assessment, through an appropriate existing or dedicated mechanism, of the utility and efficiency of decentralized evaluations, including those driven by policy requirements, to revisit coverage norms, identify where alternative and more cost-effective evaluative or other exercises may be better suited, and inform strategies, resource allocation and institutional arrangements.

Formal recommendation addressed to the legislative organs and/or governing bodies:

6 By the end of 2030, governing/legislative bodies of United Nations system organizations should request an update on the assessment of the utility and efficiency of decentralized evaluations, including their drivers, numbers and costs, and an approach for strengthening the function.

JIU Reports

2026 Reports:

JIU/REP/2026/4 & **JIU/REP/2026/4** [Expanded report],
Review of the strategic planning function in the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2026/3 & **JIU/REP/2026/3** [Expanded report],
Review of Staff Recruitment Policies and Practices in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2026/2, Review of governing body structures in the World Meteorological Organization

JIU/REP/2026/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

2025 Reports:

JIU/REP/2025/6 & **JIU/REP/2025/6** [Expanded report]
Review of the Health Services in the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2025/5 & **JIU/REP/2025/5** [Expanded report]
Review of the Ombudsman and Mediation function in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2025/4 (Comparative analysis) & **JIU/REP/2025/4** [Expanded report] (Comparative tables),
Review of the policies and practices for determining the rates of programme support costs in organizations of the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2025/3 & **JIU/REP/2025/3** [Expanded report],
Review of donor-led assessments of United Nations system organizations and other oversight-related requests from donors in the context of funding agreements and the United Nations single audit principle

JIU/REP/2025/2 & **JIU/REP/2025/2** [Expanded report],
Review of policies and practices to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2025/1 & **JIU/REP/2025/1** [Expanded report],
Review of management and administration in the United Nations Environment Programm

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