Review Highlights   JIU/REP/2020/8
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Review of mainstreaming environmental sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system

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📊 Background

The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) of the United Nations system included in its Programme of Work for 2020 the review of the Mainstreaming of Environmental Sustainability across organizations of the United Nations system, covering the four bienniums spanning from 2012 to 2019. Data for the year 2020 was also reviewed, as available, to consider the recent system-wide developments, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ten years after issuance of the JIU review on Environmental profile of the United Nations system organizations: Review of their in-house environmental management policies and practices (JIU/REP/2010/1), only 56 per cent of the recommendations have been accepted by the JIU participating organizations.

Ever since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, organizations of the United Nations (UN) system have accorded a high priority to protection of the natural environment. By adopting the Climate Neutral Policy and Strategy in 2007, the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations committed to becoming climate neutral through a combination of emissions reduction actions and offsetting, and to include environmental sustainability goals in the programming of facilities and operations. The then Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon had set the ambitious target of the United Nations system to be climate neutral by 2020. More recently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, have provided further momentum. Organizations of the United Nations system have responded with considerable enthusiasm by making efforts to integrate environmental sustainability into their policies, operations and activities.

In May 2019, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) endorsed the Strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system (2020-2030). In outlining objectives, commitments and indicators for furthering environmental sustainability, members of CEB declared their intention to mainstream environmental sustainability, both collectively within the United Nations system and individually within their respective organizations. The Strategy has been developed in two stages. Phase I covers environmental sustainability in the area of management; and, Phase II, for endorsement by CEB in 2021, would address internal environmental and social sustainability in policies, programming, facilities and operations.

❓ Objectives

The objectives of the review were to:

• Determine the extent to which environmentally sustainable policies have been developed and respond to contemporary needs and objectives of the United Nations system and of the 28 JIU participating organizations
• Examine the implementation of environmentally sustainable operations and practices at the organizational and system-wide levels, with a view to drawing lessons learned and identifying bestor good practices
o Assess the readiness of selected functional areas (such as procurement, human resources, facilities management, travel, conference services and ICT) to implement the Strategy
o Consider the effectiveness of governance, accountability, coordination, risk management and oversight mechanisms in supporting the implementation of environmentally sustainable operations and practices
• Consider the relevance of the practices of other international organizations with a view to identifying good practices and drawing on relevant international standards in respect of environmental sustainability in organizations of the United Nations system.

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What the JIU found

1. Policies on environmental sustainability management should be developed in each organization of the United Nations system

There are no international standards or benchmarks on environmental sustainability accepted and used by United Nations entities on a system-wide basis. Their absence leads to variations in practices and implementation at headquarters and in field presences. Given that policies on environmental sustainability management are absent in many organizations, the pace of progress on mainstreaming has been slow and uneven. Having a policy is not enough by itself; more important is the commitment of the entity to effectively implement the policy. An examination of the roles played by the "main drivers", both external (buy-in from Member States, pressure exerted by major contributors on account of their domestic agenda and parliamentary pressure), and internal (the commitment of the leadership and the activism and passion of the young "green (environmentally sustainable) champions"), and a comparison with their roles in mainstreaming other cross-cutting issues such as gender equality, would be pertinent.

Such variations in practices and implementation, in addition to the need to take into account the specificities of each organization based on its own realities and requirements, make the task of measuring and reporting on implementation of mainstreaming environmental sustainability quite challenging. The process of assessing the implications for the environment of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas of management and at all levels, and making environmental sustainability an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes, has not always been fully systematic or consistent.

2. Greening the Blue should enhance accountability and transparency

The information provided through Greening the Blue reporting could be used for recommending system- and organization-wide policies and actions. While enhancing transparency alone may increase the pressure to make superficial changes or inflate reporting data, enhancing accountability would avoid situations where the reporting data were not updated or quality-assured. Similar to the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women regarding gender equality in the United Nations system, the Greening the Blue process could adopt an approach that preserves the balance between accountability and transparency.

3. Oversight from Member States and oversight offices should be strengthened

Just as staff members look to the executive heads for signals about the priority assigned to any given area, so do the latter look to Member States in the legislative organs and governing bodies for signals about the priority they attach to any given area, including the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability. Therefore, Member States in the legislative organs and governing bodies of the organizations bear responsibility for providing effective oversight and overall strategic guidance, including for mainstreaming environmental sustainability in internal management areas.

Despite the adage "what gets measured gets done", only a few organizations have embedded environmental management objectives and indicators into their results frameworks. Clear action plans on environmental policies or environment-related components of corporate policies are often absent. Reporting to legislative organs and governing bodies should be a necessary tool for furthering transparency and accountability; however, there is currently no requirement in any organization to separately report on the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability.

While there have been various oversight reports on related subjects, the topic of internal environmental sustainability management has not received due attention in the work of the oversight offices of organizations of the United Nations system. Consequently, few recommendations have emerged on the subject.

4. Lack of adequate attention and resources dedicated to mainstreaming environmental sustainability

While entities of the United Nations system strongly advocate the 2030 Agenda, not all of them have incorporated the same message in their internal management functional areas, resulting in a paradox whereby entities are perceived as not practising what they preach. Related actions have often been left to individual initiatives, resulting in suboptimal gains. As a result, they have missed the opportunities to realize efficiency gains and long-term benefits by systematically incorporating environmental sustainability considerations into internal management. Among the challenges confronting an organization when paying attention to environmental sustainability management internally, the inadequacy of resources emerged as the most recurring concern. While this could be justified to some extent, this might not tell the full story. As in the case of "uniqueness" and "specificity" of mandates and context specificity, the lack of adequate resources has come to provide a convenient and handy excuse, as this would spare most entities from a serious self-examination of the priority accorded to the effective utilization of available resources. Only a few entities devote regular resources to internal environmental sustainability, some via an internal levy and some through corporate funds. A "cost lens" is often not compatible with an "environmental sustainability lens", as both have different timelines. Furthermore, the enabling environment to support behavioural change is somewhat weak, potentially causing a reputational risk.

5. Organisations should further mainstream environmental sustainability in management functional areas such as risk management, procurement, human resources and learning, facilities and travel management, events and conferences management, information and communication, finance and budget, public information and advocacy, partnerships

As the Strategy was endorsed only recently, the Inspector did not conduct an in-depth assessment of the effectiveness of implementation in each management function. He did, however, attempt to make a readiness assessment and capture progress trends insofar as they enabled, or impinged on, the mainstreaming of environmental considerations, in order to identify potential challenges and gaps vis-à-vis implementation of the targets set for 2030. Each management area has its distinctive characteristics; however, the Inspector discerned common features that could be used to enhance environmental sustainability in the entity.

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What the JIU Recommends

The report contains 10 formal recommendations, of which 1 is addressed to the legislative organs and governing bodies and 9 are addressed to the executive heads of all JIU participating organizations. The formal recommendations are complemented by 55 informal or "soft" recommendations that have been classified by themes for ease of use byparticipating organizations, as additional suggestions, typically in the form of good practices, to the executive heads and business process owners, for effecting further improvements.

By the end of 2022, legislative organs and governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations are asked to:

2 Direct the executive heads to embed environmental sustainability considerations into the management of their organizations and request them to include in the annual report on the work of the organization the results of efforts to mainstream environmental sustainability in the internal management functions of the organization.

By the end of 2022, executive heads of the United Nations system organizations are called upon to:

1 Develop an organization-wide policy for environmental sustainability in the areas of internal management functions.

3 Devote adequate resources in specific budget plans, including by better utilizing existing available resources, to mainstreaming environmental sustainability in their respective organizations, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

4 Task procurement offices with incorporating specific provisions for integrating environmental sustainability considerations into procurement policies, procedures, manuals and guidelines, including through the relevant inter-agency mechanisms, as necessary.

5 Ensure that all recruitment and selection processes, as well as performance appraisal systems, incorporate and give adequate weight to environmental sustainability understanding and behaviours, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

6 With the support of the resident coordinator system and the United Nations country team mechanisms, strengthen the coordination between the headquarters and field agencies, as well as among field agencies, in pursuing measures to reduce the environmental impact of field presences, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

7 Make all conferences, events and meetings organized by their respective organizations "paper smart", while providing printed material only upon official request and with adequate cost recovery measures following a differential pricing system in respect of different customer groups – such as official delegates, research institutions, other conference participants and students – and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

8 Task the relevant offices responsible for organizing conferences, meetings and events with developing a policy for incorporating provisions relating to environmental sustainability considerations into policies, procedures, manuals and guidelines, including through the relevant inter-agency mechanisms, as necessary.

9 Information and communications technology services' actions and projects comply with environmental sustainability considerations, including ensuring that greenhouse gas emissions are at a level compatible with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Paris agreement.

10 Make all official documentation, publications, brochures, and communication and advocacy materials available online, including through online conferencing applications or other information technology means, and report on the implementation to their legislative organs and governing bodies from 2023.

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Soft recommendations related to management functions

1) Risk management: risk assessment and mitigation

The independent oversight offices of the United Nations system should review whether measures adopted by the offices of executive heads to manage risks relating to environmental sustainability management are in place and are adequate and effective, and should develop tools for analysing environmental harm.

2) Procurement

Modify the procurement rules and procedures by adding criteria in the tenders and requests for proposals to recognize environmentally sustainable manufacturing practices (using lower quantities of plastic, having systems of recycling in place and using recycled cardboard) with a higher number of points in the technical assessment; shift the short-term cost focus to a long-term one, using sustainable procurement options as the baseline from which to select the least expensive option; prioritizing sustainable options in clearly articulated and straightforward ways; and move away from "old habits" (the use of diesel-only generators, fossil fuels and old aircrafts in emergency contexts) and conservative approaches by undertaking market intelligence on sustainable procurement, providing better access to such vendors and adopting innovative practices.

Re-examine the procurement processes for sustainability and cost-benefit. The concept of mutual recognition should be used to benefit from contracts of other entities, should these prove to be more "sustainable", particularly in the field. Also include environmentally sustainable standards for specific operations and goods (supplies brought by military contingents of troop-contributing countries for peacekeeping operations) and document any objection to these standards so as to track progress towards sustainable procurement.

Demonstrate the security and environmental benefits to make the case for sustainable procurement.

Conduct a cost-efficiency analysis of the total life cycle of specific goods. For example, solar panels have become cheaper, and, despite the initial maintenance being costly, the additional costs will balance out over time. More thoroughly integrate the principles of circular economy in public procurement actions and enact mandatory procurement for a range of products, including energy-efficient ones.

Carry out spot checks of potential suppliers. Prioritize eco-labelled products, as they offer guarantees of third-party-verified compliance with critical environmental requirements.

Clarify the responsibilities and accountability lines between requisitioners and procurement functions in the procurement manuals, to mainstream environmental sustainability criteria in procurement actions.

The procurement divisions should adopt a proactive stance, and in particular, implement the Sustainable Procurement Guidelines for United Nations Cafeterias, Food and Kitchen Equipment developed by the Sustainable United Nations facility to promote sustainable catering services and meal options.

3) Human Resources and Learning

Elaborate the values and competencies frameworks to pay greater attention to environmental sustainability, allow for training in and testing of environmental sustainability awareness, and enable a preference for those with such awareness, all other competencies and technical skills being equal. The human resources functions should report on the indicators contained in the Strategy, including on recruitment statistics on the capacity of staff to understand and implement environmental management. Under the High-level Committee on Management's "new way of working", incorporate sustainability issues and adjust competency frameworks to reflect the skill sets and competencies required for staff to operate in ways consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

Include environmental sustainability in senior managers' performance systems (developing environmental sustainability goals for their functions) or "compacts". Review the performance management systems to consider performance indicators for measuring staff's sensitivity to environmental sustainability.

Make environmental sustainability as a core value to be part of the United Nations system's common culture. Equip the staff with minimum mandatory knowledge and relevant technical skill sets (environmental auditing and sustainable procurement). Adapt the Greening the Blue tutorial to fit specific contexts (the humanitarian and peacekeeping contexts) and to enable reporting on the indicators contained in the Strategy. Collectively tap into the ILO efforts on the "Future of Work" to support a sustainable future.

Fully embrace modern technologies to ensure paper-smart and sustainable processes, using e-signatures, online platforms and videoconferencing, and abandon the outdated practices of using paper signatures and of requiring candidates to travel for interviews, among others.

Develop and implement a common, system-wide, mandatory specialized training module on incorporating environmental sustainability considerations into the internal management functional areas, targeting, staff dealing on a regular basis with procurement, human resources, facilities and infrastructure, events and conferences, ICT services, travel, budget and finance, public information and communication, training and organizational learning.

4) Facilities and infrastructure management

Replicate the good practices identified in the construction of new buildings or the renting of new premises, for becoming more environmentally sustainable. Make investments in passive design strategies (orientation, glazing, material selection, thermal mass, shading, the stack effect, insulation and landscaping for shading).

Review, individually and through the inter-agency mechanisms, and expand the calculation of greenhouse gas emissions to include scope 3 emissions, while taking necessary precautions to avoid double counting, and with the inclusion of staff members' personal vehicles in greenhouse gas emissions calculations. Turn the inventory of greenhouse gas emissions into a useful database with accountability lines for emissions reduction, and utilize greenhouse gas emissions data from facilities for effecting policy changes.

Develop a mechanism for replicating and scaling up existing good practices in the field (e.g., by using the Internet of Things for energy monitoring) and templates for environmentally sustainable leases.

Similarly, seek and enlist support from the host country governments, building owners, facilities' private contractors and commercial service providers to whom services have been outsourced to facilitate environmentally sustainable solutions, where feasible.

Embed these good practices relating to environmental sustainability in standard operating procedures wherever common premises are similarly in operation.

Prioritize environmental sustainability in the planning and design stages of common premises. In addition, provide United Nations country teams with more central guidance on how to consider environmental sustainability facets of common premises projects.

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Strengthen further the assessment of and transparent reporting on compliance for peacekeeping missions. In addition, build bridges between peacekeeping and development contexts.

Advocate a deeper understanding of the implications of "causing no environmental harm", a methodology to determine whether entities are causing any harm, and an operating model (covering, for example, ways in which goods and people are flown in).

The humanitarian operations of the United Nations system should move away from fuel generators, using the experience of entities that have already done so (the ICRC Energy Challenge programme).

Draw inspiration from the approach of ICRC to managing its environmental footprint.

In the context of shrinking office spaces, the increase in health-based risks caused by hot-desking and open spaces, and the need to reduce the United Nations system's environmental footprint, the facilities and infrastructure management function should work with the human resources function to offer greater flexibility with regard to staff members' physical presence in offices, while ensuring that, in the process, emissions are not transferred from office spaces to private homes.

5) Travel management

The recommendations contained in the JIU review of air travel policies in the United Nations system on official and business travel, are reiterated, whereby executive heads of organizations of the United Nations system should implement measures such as enforcing annual travel-capping by management function and encouraging a levy on travel as a funding mechanism to finance environmentally sustainable activities.

Review the domain of travel funded by United Nations entities, for developing and putting in place a policy that accords primacy to its environmental footprint, and the health and well-being of staff.

6) Events and conferences management

Other organizations of the United Nations system should follow the remarkable example set by WIPO in going completely "paperless" and to set their own targets and timelines for implementing this change.

The conference management services should make all meetings environmentally sustainable regardless of the number of participants.

The agreement concluded with an entity for organizing the event should contain unambiguous provisions on environmental sustainability and accountability, and the conference management services should engage with the procurement services to provide support locally with environmentally sustainable options.

The conference management services should implement the "green meeting guide" and invest in new technologies such as mobile applications and remote conferencing to make events and conferences environmentally sustainable.

7) ICT management

Other entities of the system should also incorporate environmental sustainability considerations into their ICT strategies and promote and use ICT services as instruments for environmental protection and the sustainable use of natural resources.

Revisit donation practices to ensure that the United Nations organizations are seen as acting responsibly to handle e-waste, the system-wide guidance on e-waste is implemented, and the effectiveness and credibility of take-back and e-waste management schemes handled by third parties are monitored on a regular basis.

The relevant inter-agency mechanism should task the United Nations Group on the Information Society, chaired by UNCTAD, with contributions from other relevant agencies including WMO and UNEP as facilitators of the World Summit on the Information Society action line on e-environment, with submitting, by the end of 2022, a report on measures to monitor the United Nations system's digitalization and specific, actionable recommendations for further improvements, using relevant outcomes from the Group's Dialogue on the Role of Digitalization in the Decade of Action.

8) Finance and budget: investment and banking management

Adopt systems that can track allocations and expenditures for environmental sustainability to enable the United Nations entities to report on funds devoted to and spent on promoting environmental sustainability.

Lead by example, while considering cost-benefit analysis templates for the preparation of business cases spanning several budgetary cycles as needed, in order to estimate the expected long-term returns compared to initial environmentally sustainable investments. Finance and budget services should advise on and provide support for setting up adequate monitoring, reporting and enterprise resource planning systems to demonstrate that projected savings from incorporating environmental sustainability considerations into internal management functions and processes are realized.

Develop investment policies that call for divesting from financial instruments that are not environmentally sustainable.

9) Public information and communication

Staff members should individually reflect on their footprint and ways of reducing it. The public information and communication services messaging should support and promote environmentally sustainable behaviours inside and outside the office premises.

10) Partnership

Continue system-wide efforts, including through the relevant inter-agency coordination mechanisms, to enhance consistent implementation of due diligence processes regarding potential environmental harm caused by United Nations entities. The entities should reflect specific partnerships in their action plans; for example, UNHCR is able to mobilize both expertise and funds for pursuing the sustainability agenda.

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💡 Opportunities for the future

The following areas are offered for further study and analysis for the purpose of enhancing environmental sustainability, by individual entities, in small groups, through relevant inter-agency networks or by oversight offices:

• **Biodiversity conservation**: minimizing or neutralizing the impact, as well as making a positive impact;

• **Climate-neutrality**: finding alternative ways to offsetting carbon emissions by investing in alternative means of operations; transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources;

• **Sustainable procurement**: clarifying the responsibilities and accountability lines between requisitioners and procurement functions to mainstream environmental sustainability criteria in procurement actions; proactively engaging with suppliers to obtain environmentally sustainable goods;

• **Travel policies**: revamping the travel policies by enhancing accountability and travel ceilings;

• **Clusters of collaboration**: encouraging entities with mandates closely related to environmental sustainability to work together, in order to significantly strengthen the capacity of organizations of the United Nations system to improve internal sustainability management across the system by utilizing their accumulated experience and substantive capacity in a more structured, organized and systematic manner;

• **WIPO**: Extending WIPO's exceptions and limitations for advancing environmental sustainability;

• **Inter-agency coordination**: strengthening the sharing of good practices; better leveraging internal expertise for the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability; leveraging environmental conventions for the benefit of the entire United Nations system;

• **COVID-19 pandemic context**: The current context provides an opportunity for the United Nations organizations to reimagine the system by making their policies, practices and operations, including internal management, environmentally sustainable. It would be most unfortunate if the organizations did not utilize this opportunity and instead lapsed back into the old ways and "business as usual". Therein lies the challenge before the entities: remain chained to the past, or play a pioneering role in ushering in a sustainable future for all?

🧠 Good practices from United Nations and non-United Nations actors

Travel:
· UNIDO travel policy to reduce travel with targets and ceilings by management function
· UNICEF travel policy and practices
· UNDP Greening Moonshot Facility
· OECD carbon pricing initiative
· WRI mainstreaming of environmental sustainability in travel

Procurement management:
· UNFPA collaborative sustainable procurement to shape markets
· UNOPS sustainable procurement
· OECD's environmentally sustainable procurement

Human resources:
· UN Women and the Empowerment of Women temporary virtual roster
· United Nations Secretariat Conecta platform
· WRI behavioural change approach through human resources activities

Facilities management
· UNDP Smart Premises concept, energy efficiency and the Internet of Things
· UNFPA approach to greenhouse gas emissions from facilities
· UNESCO Bangkok Green Academies
· UNESCO approach to environmentally sustainable facilities activities
· ESCAP RideShare car-sharing mobile application
· UNODC recycling programme in Myanmar
· ICRC approach to managing its environmental footprint in humanitarian contexts

Events and conference management
· ITC paperless meetings
· WFP's 'greening the Executive Board' initiative

Finance and budget: investment and banking management
· WHO guidelines for investment

Risk assessment and mitigation
· WFP Office of Internal Audit
· United Nations Secretariat Office of Internal Oversight Services

🔍 Methodology

The review employed a mixed-method research approach, which consisted of:

A desk review of legislative mandates, policies, guidelines and oversight reports related to environmental sustainability in United Nations system organizations, as well as **reports of the Secretary-General** on the subject-matter; **a desk review of environmental sustainability-related documentation** attained through online search from other **international organizations, public and private sector entities, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions**, to identify the following elements related to environmental sustainability.

An organizational questionnaire circulated to all JIU participating organizations covering: the conceptualization of environmental sustainability; legislation, policy and procedures governing environmental sustainability; procedures for decision-making and management of environmental sustainability; the evolution of environmental sustainability, including trends, constraints, opportunities and risks; internal capacity and coordination; and governance and oversight. **All the 28 JIU participating organizations provided responses** to the organisational questionnaire.

Follow-up interviews held with JIU participating organizations remotely (via phone and videoconferencing tools). **Interviews were conducted with approximately 500 staff members and officials from the entities and other identified international organizations** to identify good practices and lessons learned in respect of environmental sustainability.

A readiness assessment with the purpose of identifying potential challenges and gaps vis-à-vis implementation of the Strategy.

Consideration of contexts to identify patterns and lessons linked to opportunities and challenges arising from the management of environmental sustainability depending on the specific geographical and operational contexts.

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