



13 October 2021

General Assembly, 76th Session

Statement to the Fifth Committee on the Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

“United Nations common premises: current practices and future prospects”
JIU/REP/2020/3

Jean Wesley Cazeau and Jeremiah Kramer

Inspectors

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce the report entitled “United Nations common premises: current practices and future prospects” prepared by the Joint Inspection Unit, contained in document A/75/730 of 4 February 2021. The views of the Secretary-General and those of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination are included in the management response issued under A/75/730/Add.1.

The topic of common premises is not new to the Unit since common premises have always been envisaged since the inception of the United Nations system as a possible way to avoid competing or overlapping facilities and services in particular in the context of development-oriented field presences. A series of JIU reports have explored such opportunities both at headquarters and field locations. The preparation of the 2020 review faced two major challenges. Firstly, the extensive work on common premises, conducted in 2019 and 2020 as part of the development reform process launched by the Secretary-General, provided impetus and food for thought to the review process. At the same time, this constituted a methodological

challenge since the subject was under global scrutiny and the objective of 50 percent of premises to be shared among UN entities was a constant preoccupation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, the Business Innovation Group Strategic Results Group and high-level officials across the system. The Unit was also confronted with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has drawn attention to certain requirements for physical co-location and more globally working patterns of UN organizations and their staff. However, the pandemic surfaced after the point that this report could seriously examine its implications for common premises. Nevertheless, it is clear that lessons learned should help to inform common premises thinking going forward and we encourage the executive heads of the participating organizations to comment on the impact of such circumstances and share their take on the recommendations and their possible implementation.

Overall, our assessment is that despite innumerable calls to increase co-location by the General Assembly since 1987, relevant action had not been taken by counterpart bodies in specialized agencies. Disparate operational needs and legislative frameworks, a preference for freely-provided premises, and co-location with government counterparts have perhaps hindered a fully system-wide approach. Over the years the membership of the interagency bodies active on the matter remained focused on a limited number of players. As shown by the figures presented in the report, progress on common premises has been limited on the ground. It should be noted that the figures presented in the report, kindly shared with the Unit by the Business Innovations Group and its project team, constitute the first attempt to represent a consolidated picture of the reality of the sharing of premises among the UN system organizations. We are aware of the limitations of this dataset, however, we saw value in including these in the report as they perfectly illustrate the complexity of the issue. As stated in our report, the lack of comprehensive and accurate data on how and where UN entities are sharing premises has impeded informed decision-making on that matter.

The establishment of a capital financing mechanism for common premises has repeatedly been urged, yet no large-scale action has been taken and it remains a barrier. A handful of United Nations organizations have tools to finance their share of common premises, but they typically cannot be used to subsidize the capital required by other, smaller organizations. To bypass this issue, instruments such as public-private partnerships have been encouraged. The one experience in Eswatini and projects in Malawi, Papua New Guinea and Rwanda, however,

illustrate the difficulty to implement this type of solution and the high costs involved, including exorbitant interest rates.

Since the issuance of the report, we are pleased to note the launching of the online platform for common premises real estate related-data therefore allowing better consolidation of information to support country-by-country analysis and to have a more strategic approach to consolidation than the one imposed by the target of 50 per cent of shared premises. In the same vein, the task team on common premises and the Development Coordination Office have studied other indicators that could also represent consolidation efforts by the UN entities, such as the number of staff sharing premises or the number of agencies co-located. These possible new indicators have been communicated to the Business Innovation Group.

To make further progress towards more sharing premises among United Nations entities, we believe that innovative approaches must now be considered. To launch a reflection among United Nations partners the report calls for integrated premises planning at the regional level or the consideration of a more global approach for real estate management, for example. We hope such innovative thinking will find some echo and that these ideas could be considered further in the future, both by management and host countries. Perhaps, also, a way of pushing forward this agenda is to better express the broader benefits of common premises, whether these are financial, programmatic, reputational nature, or otherwise.

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a new situation regarding United Nations premises landscape and we are pleased to note that the High-Level Committee of Management has started to reflect on the impact future working modalities for UN personnel could mean in terms of buildings footprint.

Among the recommendations included in the report, we would like to insist on the opportunity of clarifying the role and authority of the main stakeholders such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Group inter-agency Task Force on Common Premises and Facility Services and the Development Coordination Office to support them in carrying out the common premises workstream, with the objective that proactive support to UNCTs is provided at all stages of project lifecycles.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates

Eight formal recommendations were included in the report. They are addressed mostly to the Secretary-General and the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations. We are pleased to note that these recommendations were mostly supported by the participating organizations in their comments provided through the Chief Executives Board as per the established procedure. Let me reassure you that we do understand the constraints of the United Nations entities in making further progress on this matter as they were expressed in these consolidated comments.

Please note that Recommendation 6 on the integrated planning of premises at the regional level is specifically addressed to the General Assembly with the objective to enhance the efficiency, coordination and cooperation among the United Nations system organizations regarding the planning of premises requirements at this regional level.

We thank you for your kind attention and would welcome comments from delegations and any questions you might have.

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13 October 2021

General Assembly, 76th Session

Statement to the Fifth Committee on the Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

“Blockchain applications in the United Nations system: towards a state of readiness (JIU/REP/2020/7)” – A/76/325

Petru Dumitriu

Inspector

Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce the report entitled “Blockchain applications in the United Nations system: towards a state of readiness” (JIU/REP/2020/7) prepared by the Joint Inspection Unit, contained in document A/76/325 of 15 September 2021. The views of the Secretary-General and those of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination are included in the management response issued under A/76/325/Add.1.

Blockchain is among the technologies whose interaction and blending of physical, digital and biological systems define the profile of the fourth industrial revolution. Although the technology is still young, weighing the trade-offs and determining regulatory action and operational frameworks should be a subject for multi-stakeholder dialogues, including in the United Nations system. The 2030 Agenda and the strategic calls for innovation that have followed it prompted some organizations to take the lead and pilot blockchain applications, mostly for operational activities.

There is considerable work in progress in the United Nations system: standards are being developed, legal aspects examined and blockchain pilots carried out. Ten organizations use blockchain applications for different types of projects and operations, individually and in collaboration. The ongoing use cases, most of them at field level, include supply chain, digital payments, tracing of livestock, digital identity and land registration. Most organizations that are not using blockchain now, are considering a possible use in the future.

The specific objectives of the JIU review of blockchain applications were to: map the current use of blockchain applications in the United Nations system; compile the lessons learned during this phase of incipient development and identify good practices; identify the main challenges and risks related to the use of blockchain; explore the potential use of blockchain to facilitate greater inter-agency cooperation and efficiency; and to provide inputs for developing guidance, standards and frameworks for the future use of blockchain applications.

Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates,

Allow me to briefly highlight a few key findings of the report.

There is an increasing interest in the United Nations system in the use of blockchain applications, including among organizations that are not contemplating an immediate adoption of the technology. Several organizations took the lead in experimenting with blockchain projects and can provide the system with valuable lessons learned and some promising practices.

1. Need for minimum policies and standards

While rigid regulation of blockchain at too early a stage may still be counterproductive, minimum policies and standards are expected by both users and solution providers in order to reduce legal uncertainty and encourage innovation. Most participating organizations agree that policies and standards are necessary in order to reduce legal uncertainty and encourage innovation.

2. Building of in-house technical expertise

The views on the need of in-house technical expertise may diverge, but most participating organizations consider that building such expertise is useful and realistic.

3. Use of open-source blockchain solutions

The creative use of open-source blockchain solutions is feasible and can reduce vendor lock-in and other forms of excessive dependence on the market. In line with the call by the Secretary-General in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation for the United Nations to deploy digital public goods, organizations should ensure that the software development they undertake will follow, to the extent possible, open-source principles and that the codes that are developed are made available to other United Nations organizations. The report also recommends that a United Nations representative in charge of digital technologies and related issues is being assigned the task of following the development of blockchain interoperability standards and open-source projects aimed at blockchain interoperability, as part of an overall consideration of the policy implications of the technology, working with all organizations in the United Nations system.

4. Blockchain's network vocation supports interagency collaboration and partnerships

Blockchain, by virtue of its network vocation, carries unprecedented opportunities for inter-agency collaboration and collective engagement in support of the Sustainable Development Goals, while working in silos will be a recipe for a waste of resources, duplication, lack of coherence and blind dependence on commercial terms. Partnerships with other stakeholders can take new forms, but the trust and reputation aspects need to adhere to the existing rules.

5. A culture change towards innovation and collaborative approach

Blockchain implies a need for culture change at the level of inter-agency collaboration: for example, acceptance of the role of leading organizations or coalitions of the willing as a driving force in innovation efforts; encouraging collective engagements in using blockchain in support of the Sustainable Development Goals; joint investment in blockchain projects; and incentivizing cooperation. One of the most optimistic findings of the present review is that the first years of blockchain practice in the United Nations system confirm an already healthy emerging tendency towards inter-agency cooperation. The report recommended, among others, that organizations endorse the Principles for Digital Development and that the governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should encourage Member States to engage with the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) in its exploratory and preparatory work on legal issues relating to blockchain in the broader context of the digital economy and digital trade.

6. Decision-making matrix for blockchain as practical guidance

Finally, the report proposes a comprehensive decision-making matrix for blockchain as practical guidance for the determination of future business cases. Organizations should ensure that any decision on using blockchains should be based on an appropriate determination of the business case and of the most suitable solution, using as guidance a decision-making matrix, as described in the present report, as well as any enhancements and/or adaptations thereof. The examination of possible blockchain use cases should be further based on assessments of project risks, including with respect to relevant organizational policies and regulations on privileges and immunities, data protection, confidentiality, cybersecurity, system integrity and reputation.

Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates

The report includes eight formal recommendations. Out of these, two are addressed to the governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations, one to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and five recommendations are addressed to the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations. The report also contains nine soft recommendations meant to disseminate good practices and improve blockchain knowledge-sharing at the system level.

We are pleased to note that participating organizations, overall, welcome the report and its findings and appreciate the Unit's initiative to foster innovation and digital transformation through the adoption of new technologies and related processes in their comments provided through the Chief Executives Board as per the established procedure.

We thank you for your kind attention and would welcome comments from delegations and any questions you might have.

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