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STATEMENT TO THE FIFTH COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Agenda item 138: Proposed programme budget for 2023

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

"Review of Business Continuity Management in United Nations System Organizations"

A/77/256 (JIU/REP/2021/6)

Inspectors Eileen A. Cronin and Victor Moraru

Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce the "Review of Business Continuity Management in United Nations System Organizations" prepared by the Joint Inspection Unit, which is contained in document A/77/256. The views of the Secretary-General and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination are contained in the document A/77/256/Add.1.

This topic was originally addressed by the JIU in 2011; the update of the review was included in the JIU's programme of work for 2021 at the suggestion of participating organizations in the wake of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the stress test it provoked across all levels of the United Nations system.

Business continuity is defined as *the capability of an organization to continue delivery of essential and time-critical services at acceptable predefined levels during and/or following a disruptive incident.*

The objectives of the review included informing legislative organs, governing bodies and executive heads about the status of the utilization and integration of business continuity policies, plans, processes and practices across United Nations system organizations; oversight and monitoring of business continuity management; as well as identification of good practices and lessons learned to guide future initiatives. As a consequence of the timing of this review, undertaken and completed in 2021, one of the main objectives was to analyze how business continuity management was actually being put into practice in managing the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the impact of interruptions on oversight, governance activities, and on the enablers contributing to the continuity of operations.

Findings, conclusions and recommendations

The JIU identified 11 core elements that are a foundation for a comprehensive approach to business continuity management, with these falling into two distinct areas: (1) policy guidance and (2) business continuity plans and their associated planning processes.

Only one third of JIU participating organizations fully reflect all 11 core elements in their current policies and practices. Reviewing these elements against established business continuity management frameworks is the first recommendation in this review. This should be undertaken in light of the numerous changes that have been made across the system to business continuity management policies, guidance and practices in response to the pandemic.

More rigor and discipline in the areas of business continuity management maintenance, exercise and review practices are necessary. The JIU found that slightly more than half of participating organizations have criteria for updating their business continuity plans, and that of these, only 5 organizations actually tested their plans as a matter of routine prior to the pandemic. Relatedly, internal oversight offices should audit their business continuity management policies and processes in a more comprehensive way, conducting their own independent assessments of business continuity management, with special consideration given to the verification of policies and practices which were adjusted or changed altogether during the pandemic.

Another area of concern is the lack of discipline with regard to processing lessons learned as a result of significant interruptions and disruptions. This is a systematic missed opportunity which hinders organizational resilience. Organizational resilience is defined as *the ability to anticipate, prepare for, prevent, mitigate, respond to and recover from an interruptive incident*. For United Nations system organizations to respond more effectively and efficiently to future disruptions, it is essential that they draw on insights gleaned from direct experience with such events. Unfortunately, only 11 organizations have related objectives written into their business continuity management policies, and very few could provide evidence of putting such objectives into practice prior to 2020. Recommendation 3 outlines the importance of strengthening learning mechanisms by requiring after-action reviews and internal management assessments as a matter of policy following disruptive incidents. Recommendation 5 puts the aforementioned into action and context by calling on executive heads to conduct an internal management assessment of their respective organization's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendation 6 of the review calls on governing bodies to be briefed on this assessment and to take appropriate decisions to address the identified gaps and risks and to ensure continuity of business operations.

In March 2020, the entire world was in some way, shape or form impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the main questions addressed in the review were: How prepared were

United Nations system organizations for a major disruption to their operations? How could they better prepare to ensure resilience in light of the next inevitable disruption to their operations? The last chapter of this review presents a case study outlining a 4-stage business continuity management response, noting early lessons learned and good practices, as well as highlighting the remarkable agility with which some United Nations organizations navigated business continuity during the pandemic. This case study points to lessons learned in establishing and maintaining risk-based business continuity plans that integrate occupational safety and health (OSH) principles, and in particular, mental health and well-being considerations into the business continuity planning process.

Additionally, the case study illustrates the absence of continuity plans and planning in governing and legislative bodies. In the second quarter of 2020, nearly 1,500 meetings were cancelled. Prior to 2020, only 7 organizations used virtual platforms in their governing body activities. Crucially, only about half of United Nations system organizations have plans in place for the continuation of governance activities. A dedicated plan should be put in place to address disruptions to governance activities, including provisions for virtual meetings and decision-making.

The review also found that inter-agency coordination is uneven in terms of its system-wide policy and support for implementation of the policy and its elements. The organizational resilience management system (ORMS) is a system-wide policy that features business continuity management and includes a set of performance indicators. Executive heads are encouraged to report to their governing bodies on progress in implementing ORMS, which will further accountability and highlight the importance of system-wide coherence on this policy and its approach.

In the past ten years, substantial progress has been made in many areas of business continuity management across United Nations system organizations. However, gaps in core elements in business continuity management frameworks and capacity remain, and organizations operating without effective frameworks risk incoherent and uncoordinated responses to crises. Furthermore, those that do not have provisions for learning from disruptions risk a valuable opportunity to build organizational resilience and better prepare for future crises.

Mr. Chair, distinguished delegates,
We thank you for your consideration of this report and welcome questions and comments from delegates during the informal meetings.

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