ARTICLE 13 - JIU60

Governance in the organizations of the United Nations System: a longstanding priority of the Joint Inspection Unit

This article is part of a series commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations system highlighting its mandate, evolution and contribution to the United Nations system over the last six decades.

> *Good governance relies on informed decisions taken by Member States that are translated into effective actions within the organizations. Throughout its existence the JIU has examined how UN governing bodies, executive management, and oversight functions work together towards this goal. While the JIU's contribution determines clear benchmarks for success, its ultimate impact depends on how effectively organizations and their governing bodies put them into practice.*

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The Joint Inspection Unit marks with its 60th anniversary, six decades of assessing governance within the United Nations system. Throughout the years, the JIU's methodological approaches for analyzing governance related matters have taken different forms and perspectives to meet organizational needs across the United Nations (UN) system. For example, the JIU has examined governance arrangements as one dimension of individual management and administration reviews, while in system-wide reviews it has developed benchmarks, and in targeted reviews on governance matters it has applied dedicated, criteria-based assessments of governing structures while showcasing the practices engaged by similar entities from an organizational perspective.

Governance is, at its core, a straightforward concept. Member States set the strategic direction of an organization, approve its resources and monitor the performance of the organization and its executive head; executive heads manage delivery of the organizations' strategic framework within the authority delegated to them; oversight functions provide independent assurance that what was agreed is happening; and accountability arrangements connect decisions with those responsible for implementing them. Where those elements fit together, governing bodies get reliable information and decisions are followed through.

The JIU is uniquely positioned in the UN system as it can independently assess several organizations at once and analyze whether a governance weakness found in one is particular to that entity or common across other entities in the UN system, and whether an arrangement already tested in one place is worth considering in another.

Why comparison matters

The JIU applies comparing and contrasting between organizations in its work. This allows Member States to see whether an organization's governance arrangements are broadly comparable with peer entities or represent an exception and also to understand the benefits, risks or circumstances behind those differences. For management, the JIU identifies practices already tested and proven effective in similar settings as well as structural weaknesses that should be mitigated before becoming operational issues.

Governance related findings from single organization reviews

The reviews of management and administration in single organizations systematically include an analysis of the governance arrangements and management framework of each entity. These reviews focus on the organizations' structures, committees, delegation of authority, risk management, and oversight functions.

Over the years, the reviews of management and administration in single organizations have highlighted certain recurring issues:

1. The most frequent is an unclear division of responsibility between governing bodies, executive leadership and secretariats. Mandates of governing bodies overlap, advisory roles are not clearly delineated from oversight roles, and working methods are open to interpretation as to who decides what and on whose advice.

2. The accountability arrangements are fragmented in many organizations, namely scattered across regulations, rules, policies and administrative instruments, without a unifying approved document that shows how they connect.
3. Inspectors have identified instances where the independence of oversight committees and internal oversight offices was not explicitly elaborated in their terms of reference, whose appointment and reporting arrangements were not sufficiently safeguarded, and who lacked a direct reporting line to the governing body that relies on their advice.
4. Risk management has appeared repeatedly as immature in terms of the completeness of its institutional framework, monitoring and reporting of risks to governing bodies, and resources assigned to the risk management function within the organizations.

Independent oversight and accountability frameworks

The 2019 review of audit and oversight committees assessed the relevant arrangements across the UN system against 13 good-practice criteria identified by the JIU. The 2023 review of accountability frameworks developed a model framework comprising 24 benchmarks updated from the 2011 JIU proposal. Rather than describing arrangements organization by organization, these reviews provided a common basis against which organizations could examine their own structures.

For audit and oversight committees, the criteria cover:

1. independence and reporting lines to governing bodies,
2. a mandate comprising oversight, internal control, risk management, ethics and anti-fraud, and
3. the breadth of expertise of committee members, their selection and appointment process and subsequent performance assessment of the committee.

For accountability frameworks, the benchmarks call for a stand-alone, public document, owned by the executive head and overseen by the governing body, that links control, oversight and delegation of authority through concrete pillars, compacts and indicators. Both reviews also found that the UN system organizations had made significant progress since the JIU had last examined these subjects, in 2010 and 2011 respectively. The approach of identifying benchmarks and good practice criteria can be traced back to the JIU's 2006 report on oversight lacunae, which rated each organization against oversight standards developed by the JIU.

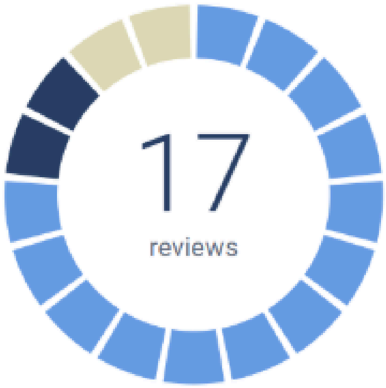
Benchmarks for governance in UN funds and programmes and in UN specialized agencies

The 2023 review of the Executive Boards of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS (joint), as well as UNICEF and UN-Women assessed those boards against a benchmark established by the JIU based on best practices across and also outside the UN system which covered six components: their roles and responsibilities, their composition and structure, the secretariats that support them, the conduct of their meetings, their relationship with oversight functions, and their responsibilities for risk management. The review concluded that none of the boards were fully aligned with the JIU benchmark. The review identified insufficient clarity in board roles, the lack of comprehensive terms of reference for boards and for board members, the absence of committees of the executive board for specific organizational matters, limited safeguards for board secretariats, weaknesses in meeting practices and documentation, and unclear delineation in board responsibilities for oversight and risk.

Most recently, in 2026, the JIU examined the governing body structures of WMO, in a review assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization's governance and benchmarking it against other UN specialized agencies. The benchmarks developed for this review covered governance and leadership, representation, hierarchy of roles, segregation of duties, decision tracking, oversight, risk and efficiency. It was designed for a governance framework with distinct legislative, executive, regional and technical governing bodies. The findings showed partial or unmet alignment in representation, role hierarchy, segregation of duties, decision tracking, oversight and risk governance. The review also included a detailed comparative analysis of governance arrangements across all UN specialized agencies on comparable topics: how governing bodies are composed, what model of representation they use, how often they meet, whether they work through specialized committees, how executive bodies oversee performance and budget between sessions, how executive heads are held to account, what audit and oversight arrangements exist, and what secretariat support governing bodies receive.

60th anniversary logo

Governance related reviews, 2016-2026



13 Management and administration reviews

- UNESCO 2026
- UNEP 2025
- UN-Women 2024
- FAO 2023
- UNFPA 2023
- UN-Habitat 2022
- WMO 2021
- UNAIDS 2019
- ICAO 2019
- UNOPS 2018
- UPU 2017
- UNIDO 2017
- ITU 2016

2 System-wide reviews

- Accountability frameworks 2023
- Audit and oversight committees 2019

2 In-depth reviews of governance frameworks

- WMO governing body structures 2026
- Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF and UN-Women 2023

From assessment to change

The implementation of JIU recommendations issued in relation to governance topics in the last 10 years has brought stronger oversight (a new independent oversight committee at UNAIDS; revised or broader audit committee mandates at UNOPS and ICAO); risk management being brought before governing bodies (ITU, UNIDO); a new accountability framework at WMO; and more regular reporting and engagement with governing bodies (UPU, UNIDO, UNAIDS, UNESCO). From a system-wide perspective, 16 organizations updated the charters, mandates and self-assessment practices of their audit and oversight committees.

Practices for the reforms ahead

Looking at the findings from governance assessments in the last 10 years, a number of governance practices emerge as directly relevant to the current UN80 reform discussions under way, including the need for UN organizations to have in place:

- Independent oversight committees with clear mandates, transparent membership and direct access to governing bodies.
- Accountability frameworks that are publicly accessible and stand-alone, approved or overseen by legislative organs or governing bodies, and linked to internal control and oversight.
- Periodic governance reviews to assess whether earlier reforms remain fit for purpose.
- Self-assessments by governing bodies of their meetings, documentation, participation and strategic focus.
- Decision-tracking systems for governing bodies that record what was adopted, who is responsible, what the status of implementation is and what follow-up is due and by when.
- Stronger risk governance through risk appetite definitions or statements, risk registers, maturity assessments and regular reporting to governing bodies.

What makes governance reform meaningful?

The wider point the JIU reviews make about reform is that changing an organizational chart or rule of procedure does not, in and of itself, constitute governance reform. In addition, not all necessary changes can be implemented at the same pace. Amending a foundational document or the structure of a governing body is a matter for Member States and can take years rather than months. As such, the JIU reviews that address this type of change also propose task forces, phased analyses, and preparatory work, rather than immediate redesign.

The JIU's contribution to governance reviews across UN system organizations is objective, analytical, impartial and independent. It identifies good practices in governance, assesses organizations against these, and shows Member States and management what comparable entities have done. The JIU's role is to provide independent evidence, comparative analysis and recommendations on what could be strengthened and why. Turning those recommendations into lasting change rests with governing bodies and executive heads. Sixty years after the Unit's creation, that relationship between independent oversight, institutional ownership and implementation remains central to moving from recommendations to results.