REVIEW OF STAFF EXCHANGE AND SIMILAR INTER-AGENCY MOBILITY MEASURES IN UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

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Background

The concept of inter-agency mobility has long been prominent in the United Nations (UN) system as a means of strengthening unity of purpose, a common culture, and shared values. Since 1949, the framework for this has been set out in successive iterations of an Inter-Organization Agreement concerning the Transfer, Secondment or Loan of Staff among the Organizations Applying the United Nations Common System of Salaries and Allowances. The current version of the agreement dates from 2012.

Work on inter-agency mobility has been supplemented by periodic examinations of inter-agency mobility by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), and the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU).

Emphasis now attached to more integrated UN system approaches and to working in partnerships to achieve the 2030 Agenda draws fresh attention to inter-agency mobility.

Objective and Purpose

The review examined the functioning of inter-agency staff mobility and assessed whether policies and mechanisms respond to contemporary needs. It did not study mobility internal to individual organizations.

What JIU concluded

1. Inter-agency mobility is a fragment of a larger human resources management puzzle.

Inter-agency mobility is but a small fragment of a larger human resources management puzzle. The past focus on it as a free-standing issue confined the discussion to administrative frameworks applicable to a minor subset of staffing, and left unanswered how it connects to human resources policies and contributes to improved organizational or UN system performance. This helps to explain why there is scant evidence of priority being attached to inter-agency mobility despite decades of discussion.

2. Inter-agency mobility remains modest and is not actively encouraged or shown to be valued by most organizations.

Staff value inter-agency mobility opportunities and organizations are eager to access inter-agency experience. However, the actual incidence of such mobility remains limited.
Staff indicate they have limited visibility of opportunities and processes. Long-known barriers have not been addressed. Most organizations neither encourage inter-agency mobility nor apply measures to show that they value it. The CEB coordination mechanisms have not delivered on promised measures to encourage and enable inter-agency mobility.

3. Opportunistic application of the 2012 Agreement and other inconsistencies or gaps undermine the regime.

The inconsistent application by some organizations of the 2012 Agreement, driven largely by the desire to avoid assuming responsibility for accrued financial liabilities, is eroding the functioning of the regime and puts staff at a disadvantage. Of particular concern is the practice of making case-by-case judgments on whether to apply the 2012 Agreement and on which earned benefits and entitlements to recognize. In some instances, organizations ask candidates to resign and start fresh rather than accept a transfer.

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4. Neither data collection nor the gender dimension have received sufficient attention.

Data on inter-agency mobility are still not being collected or published, impeding the formulation of evidence-based policies. The attention devoted to the gender dimensions of inter-agency mobility has significantly diminished.

5. A UN system approach is not evident, however opportunities to strengthen a system culture are available.

With rare exception, organizational silos prevail in the staffing arena. Organizations want to carry out separate selection and assessment processes; shared talent pools are rare.
The review identified opportunities to strengthen a "system" culture through vectors driving a more cross-organizational approach. These include the development system reform, in particular the reform of the resident coordinator system and the new UN system leadership framework. The commitment of organizations to strengthen career support for staff should impel facilitation of cross-organizational career paths.

6. Demand for exchanges among like-minded organizations abound.

Some organizations show keen interest in exchanges with like-minded counterparts. There should be no impediment to clusters of willing organizations providing opportunities for each other's staff based on common thematic interest or geographic opportunity. Training and development assignments can supplement the tools available through the 2012 Agreement.

7. Staff exchanges with non-UN actors remain rare.

Organizations perceive an opportunity to benefit from staff exchanges with non-UN actors (such as financial institutions, foundations and the private sector). However, these have remained uncommon, slow to process, and difficult to realize.

8. Barriers to inter-agency movement undermine current strategic objectives and processes.

Reduction of barriers to inter-agency mobility would contribute to supporting the following strategic objectives.:

1. Delivering on the 2030 Agenda commitment to work for shared results, to reposition the development system, and to work in deeper partnership with non-UN actors;

2. Applying common business operations in the human resources field to address fragmentation and duplication;

3. Positioning the UN system as an employer of choice in a changing demographic and technological landscape.

Key social security arrangements are also relevant. Differences in health insurance regimes add complexity to inter-agency mobility decisions, begging once again the question of why there is not a common approach to this social security pillar. It is also necessary to consider how pension arrangements, which tend to incentivize long term tenure, can more readily enable transition in and out of the UN system.

9. Inter-governmental oversight is inter-agency mobility is lacking.

Inter-agency mobility has not been subject to sufficient intergovernmental oversight. Legislative bodies have very limited visibility of inter-agency mobility and how it contributes either to the performance of the organizations they oversee or to the more integrated functioning of the UN system.

💡 What JIU Recommends

The JIU makes 10 formal recommendations to the General Assembly and executive heads of Organizations, as well as 32 informal recommendations.

The General Assembly is called on to:

1 Request the ICSC to examine periodically the status of inter-agency mobility and the degree of its integration into human resources management policies of organizations.

The Secretary-General of the UN and Executive heads of Organizations, working through the CEB as appropriate, are called on to:

2 Develop standards for the systematic collection, monitoring, and consistent reporting of staff mobility relevant data;

3 Review administrative issuances to clarify how inter-agency mobility is treated in those contexts;

4 Cease the practice of asking incoming staff to resign and decide by the end of 2021 to accept benefits and entitlements on the basis stipulated in the Agreement;

5 Revise the 2012 Agreement to specify procedures for the handling of allegations of misconduct;

6 Assess if there are factors that impact on the participation of women in inter-agency mobility that should be taken into account in the formulation of related policies or other measures;

7 Articulate the business case for inter-agency mobility;

8 Assess the impact of the UN system leadership framework on the development of a common management culture supportive of a 'One UN' mindset;

9 Enable all UN system staff members to compete for vacant posts on a basis equal to that established for their own staff;

10 Define how the mutual recognition of rules and procedures will be applied to overcome regulatory and procedural barriers to inter-agency mobility.

Methodology & Approach

In accordance with the JIU internal standards and working procedures, the review was conducted using a blend of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods from different sources for consistency, validity, and reliability.

Desk review of relevant documentation such as reports of the CEB Human Resources Network, ICSC reports, historical agreements, guidance and technical notes; human resources strategies, administrative issuances, policies and guidance of participating organizations; and staff rules and regulations.

Three questionnaires to:

- **28 JIU participating organizations**
- **25 staff associations & 3 federations**

    The survey sought to gather staff associations and federations perception of the functioning of inter-agency mobility and of the dialogue with management on the matter. Their perceptions were triangulated with other views expressed on inter-agency mobility and collected from other data sources.

- **CEB secretariat**

145 interviews were conducted with officials of participating organizations, both at headquarters and in the field (Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania). The team also met with officials of CEB, ICSC and the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund. Interviews covered all 28 JIU participating organizations.

11 non-UN international organizations interviewed.

4 focus groups were held in Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania with UN country teams and human resources management teams to gathered feedback on the following six key review areas:

- Context of field-based organizations;
- Exchange with non-UN actors;
- Support and value granted;
- Organizational versus staff interest;
- Common selection processes;
- Nationally recruited staff.

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