



**General Assembly**

Distr.  
GENERAL

A/41/686  
8 October 1986

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

---

Forty-first session  
Agenda item 114

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Changing use of computers in organizations of the United Nations  
system in Geneva: management issues

Comments of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments (see annex) on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The changing use of computers in organizations of the United Nations system in Geneva: management issues" (A/40/410).

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The changing use of computers in organizations of the United Nations system in Geneva: management issues" (A/40/410) was limited to Geneva agencies, of which the United Nations Office at Geneva is but one. The present report contains the comments of the Secretary-General on those aspects of the Inspector's report which relate to the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations in general.
2. The Secretary-General fully endorses the view, summarized in paragraph 21 of the report, that the aims of United Nations system computer and information system activities are (a) to promote effective international information exchange, especially for development co-operation; (b) to develop co-ordinated, or at least compatible, information systems within the United Nations system; and (c) to develop effectively and use computerized systems to improve operations within the organizations.
3. The Secretary-General also concurs with the historical analysis that was made of computer developments within the United Nations system, and particularly with the need for strengthening efforts to improve information systems co-ordination and compatibility. In this regard it is important to recognize that computer systems development is a support service and that this valuable service has grown as a by-product of changes and developments in the overall United Nations sectoral and administrative programmes. In this context, when programme priorities of sectoral and administrative programmes are established, resource allocation for computer support must be taken more fully into account.
4. In the administrative area, special efforts have been made at Headquarters to bring policy direction in computer developments into sharper focus. The reorganization of the Department of Administration and Management, as set out in A/C.5/40/60, assigns special responsibility for formulating Secretariat-wide policy, standards and procedures, and operating practices for computerized information systems and the application of new technologies to the new Management Services Division. A Technological Innovations Board, composed of major users, has also been established to oversee and co-ordinate the introduction and utilization of office automation technology throughout the Secretariat.
5. New technological developments, particularly in communications links between New York and Geneva as well as other duty stations, now enable joint development of computer systems and interaction of diverse users with Headquarters. The impact of this development will require considerable adaptation of existing documentation and information systems arrangements and practices to take full advantage of the considerable benefits that will accrue from the automation of conference servicing support and availability of United Nations data bases to overseas offices and the regional commissions.

6. To assist in planning future developments in this rapidly changing field, special attention will be given to measures for the effective use of emerging information processing, storage and retrieval technology in the evaluation of the electronic data processing programme at Headquarters. A report thereon will be submitted to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination in 1987.

#### Specific comments

##### (a) Planning and control of systems development

Recommendation 1: Each organization should establish clear-cut responsibilities for the orderly planning and control of overall information systems development, with sufficient high-level stature and adequate management and technical staff expertise and time made available for this purpose

7. The Inspector explores in some depth the issue of systems development in the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). This analysis is placed in the context of the policy framework of United Nations computerization as a whole, for which overall responsibility is at Headquarters. After a brief historical review, the Inspector concludes (A/40/410, para. 156) that the problems at UNOG fall into three interrelated areas: over-burdened data processing services, very limited systems development activities, and unclear systems development policies and responsibilities.

8. While the Secretary-General concurs with the main thrust of this recommendation, it should be noted that the inherent complexities of United Nations programme planning and control also affect overall information systems development. As a means of assuring co-ordination between information systems in the same general areas, or systems in the widely disparate types of endeavour in which the United Nations is engaged, the Programme Planning Budgeting Board serves as a major part of the overall co-ordinating, planning and review mechanism. The present policies which govern programme budget proposals and the measurement of progress towards objectives have been extended and applied to electronic data processing and information systems developments within the United Nations as part of its performance reporting process. Most recent efforts in this regard include the reorganization of computer systems development responsibilities at Headquarters and the establishment of a high-level Technological Innovations Board to foster and co-ordinate the introduction of new office automation technologies.

9. Advances in computer system development techniques, coupled with newly established direct communications links, have enabled the Management Services Division at Headquarters and the Management Systems Service at the United Nations Office at Geneva to address common problems related to existing and new computer-based systems. Under this form of organizational arrangement, both the United Nations Office at Geneva and Headquarters can routinely work in unison and on a shared basis on computer systems dealing with payroll, general ledger accounts, accounts receivable, personnel, recruitment, disarmament affairs, library, terminology, training, philatelic sales and numerous other areas. Decisions on workload, work programmes, and shared projects are made on a

continuous basis, with staff resources being shared for specific projects. The Secretary-General anticipates that the same type of shared and joint activities will be possible between Headquarters and other duty stations as a result of the enhanced communications system.

Recommendation 2: To support orderly and cost-effective systems development, governing bodies of the organizations might wish to request periodic reports on systems development policy and progress, and on specific services improved, processes simplified and streamlined, and cost savings achieved

10. The Secretary-General concurs with the need for periodic reports to governing bodies. A report on an evaluation of the electronic data processing programme at Headquarters will be presented to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its first session in 1987. At the request of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, 1/ a comprehensive report on computer resources and requirements in the regional commissions will be submitted in mid-1987.

Recommendation 3: The Advisory Committee for the Co-ordination of Information Systems (ACCIS) should establish an informal inter-agency computer working group in Geneva to share information, ideas and experiences on computerized systems development and explore mutually-beneficial opportunities for co-operation

11. The Secretary-General takes note of this recommendation and, in consultation with other members of ACCIS, will determine its feasibility and utility.

(b) Human resources

Recommendation 4: Each organization should establish and maintain a well-rounded programme of computer training, not only in procedures for computer use but to provide basic "computer literacy" training and understanding for all staff who will be involved in computer system development and operations

12. The Secretary-General concurs with this recommendation and notes that in recognition of its essential role in training the staff of the United Nations Office at Geneva in modern office practices, techniques and technology, the Management Systems Service at UNOG has re-deployed its budgetary resources to permit the training of more than 150 staff members per year in fields such as word-processing, computer concepts and use of particular computer facilities. As no staff were available in-house for this purpose, this training was accomplished by the exercise of the most stringent economies by the Management Systems Service at the United Nations Office at Geneva in order to make this training available to selected staff of UNOG within existing budget limits on expenditures, utilizing the training facilities of the International Computing Centre at Geneva on a reimbursable basis.

Recommendation 5: Each organization should ensure a high degree of computer systems and management systems skills in future professional recruitments for information management posts, not only for central computer and management systems or services staff but for data base administrators, records management staff, librarians, archivists, and related staff as well

13. The Secretary-General concurs with this recommendation and, to that end, will take into account these qualifications when selecting staff for these types of positions.

Recommendation 6: The High Commissioner for Refugees and the Executive Director of the International Trade Centre UNCTAD/GATT should strengthen their computer unit professional staffs in order to sustain and further the significant systems development progress that they have made

14. The Secretary-General takes note of this recommendation.

Recommendation 7: The Secretary-General of the United Nations should take urgent action to (a) ensure a clear-cut process for overall United Nations information systems development; (b) re-assess the adequacy and centralized-decentralized balance of management services and computer systems staffing in major United Nations duty stations; and (c) have the Administrative Management Service determine UNOG systems development staffing needs based on a detailed survey of present and projected user requirements

15. The first part of this recommendation concerning the control of systems development is closely related to the substance of recommendation 1, in that it deals with the oversight of work programmes and their accomplishment, particularly as they relate to information systems and electronic data processing, and the same comments would apply. Concerning the question of centralization versus decentralization of staffing between Headquarters and major United Nations duty stations, it is anticipated that the enhanced communications systems will enable the development of close working relationships between Headquarters and the regional commissions and overseas offices, similar to that now existing between the United Nations Office at Geneva and Headquarters, and permit joint and shared computer systems development. This arrangement will continue the trend towards computer systems decentralization that has been in progress for some years, while assuring close co-ordination towards common objectives. With regard to part (c) of the recommendation, a review of the staffing of the Management Systems Service, UNOG, will be included in the work programme of the new Management Services Division at the first opportunity.

(c) Computer based communications

Recommendation 8: The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) should develop the best possible proposal to extend to the specialized agencies of the system telecommunications arrangements which are presently granted only to the United Nations, and present this proposal to the earliest possible meeting of the Administrative Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

16. In chapter VIII of the report, the Inspector discusses computer-based communications and notes the growth in significance to the organizations at Geneva, particularly with reference to the approval by the General Assembly of the proposal to enhance the United Nations communications system. The Inspector correctly notes the potential for substantial cost-savings for the specialized agencies if the facilities of the enhanced United Nations system could be made available to them.

In this regard, the United Nations has initiated a study with the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union on the question of the use of a common network by the United Nations and the specialized agencies, following a decision by the Administration Council of ITU to authorize such a study. Completion of this preliminary study is anticipated in 1987, leading to subsequent actions which would permit the specialized agencies to utilize the enhanced United Nations system. The Secretary-General believes that these improvements will be of benefit to the United Nations as well as the specialized agencies, since the enhanced system will provide the means to utilize available resources more effectively, to communicate, to transmit documents and to access data bases and computer programmes at various locations.

17. The Inspector noted that the examination of the impact of new communications technologies on the handling and transfer of information in the United Nations system had been accorded priority by the Advisory Committee for the Co-ordination of Information Systems (ACCIS), and that a technical panel had reviewed the cost-effectiveness of alternative technologies. The Secretary-General, for his part, is committed to co-operating with the other United Nations agencies to "improve communication arrangements and thereby programmes and services" and thus take advantage of the opportunities presented as emphasized by the Inspectors.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Fortieth Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/40/7), para. 32.

-----