General Assembly

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Item 114 of the provisional agenda*

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Co-operation between and management of libraries
of the United Nations system

Comments of the Secretary-General

    The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the members of the General
Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled
"Co-operation between and management of libraries of the United Nations system"
(A/39/299).

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    * A/39/150.

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1.   The Secretary-General welcomes the report by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on "Co-operation between and management of libraries of the United Nations system" and considers it a constructive contribution towards solving the increasingly complex problems in the field of information management. The observations that follow relate to the various recommendations by the inspectors in chapter IV of their report and to some of the comments and observations made by the inspectors throughout the report. Some practical steps already taken to implement the recommendations are also discussed.

2.   It is appropriate to mention that the organizations in the United Nations system have long recognized the crucial role of information interchange to promote co-operative international problem-solving and to harmonize national actions to meet common needs. This is demonstrated by the number of existing libraries and information systems listed in the 1980 IOB Directory of Information Systems. In a 1982 resolution on information systems (1982/71) the Economic and Social Council cited information as "one of the most valuable resources at the disposal of the United Nations system" and stressed the importance of co-ordinating and harmonizing the organizations' information systems. The Secretary-General recognizes the importance of the subject and appreciates this report as a valuable addition to the various reports prepared by the inspectors on related subjects such as the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems (JIU/REP/78/7), co-ordination of public information activities (JIU/REP/81/2), communications in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/82/6) and publications policy and practice in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/84/5).

3.   The inspectors state in their report that there are indications that the existence of information available in the United Nations system is not widely known, especially at the national level and that the libraries of the system need to act to develop a more responsive, comprehensive and collaborative network of library services than that which presently exists. They recognize, however, that the large libraries of the system have already made progress towards modern and responsive library services. They suggest in the following recommendations that special attention be paid to inter-library co-operative activities, to the strengthening of internal library-management processes and to the use of new technologies in order to facilitate the development of an efficient library network.

Specific comments
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Recommendation 1: Co-operative activities

The executive heads of the organizations should designate the head of their organization's central library to participate in an inter-library panel that will help develop a co-operative and effective network of United Nations system libraries. This panel should meet periodically, establish a practical co-operative work programme and report back jointly to the organizations on actions taken and needed. Among specific areas of concern the panel should consider:

1 (a) As a top priority, actions needed to finally develop common indexing vocabularies and bibliographic control over United Nations system documentation.

4.   As mentioned by the inspectors, the idea of developing common bibliographic control over the documentation produced by the United Nations system is not new. The unfinished exploratory work of the ACC Task Force on Indexing Vocabularies, which was discontinued in 1979, has been revived in several areas with a larger scope and has taken into account the computerization effort of many of the libraries and units. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library has implemented its United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS) and is organizing co-operative activities with the United Nations Office of Geneva Library, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Library and the Centre on Transnational Corporations. It is also investigating the possibility of co-operation with the Economic Commission for Latin America Library and the Vienna International Centre (VIC) Library. The Information Systems Unit of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs (DIESA) is experimenting with the merging of tapes on information concerning unpublished literature of the regional commissions. The United Nations Centre on Science and Technology for Development is attempting to co-ordinate systems in science and technology in order to build the global network for science and technology recommended by the Vienna Programme of Action.

5.   Work on indexing vocabularies has also made considerable progress. A second meeting of an expert group on a new edition of the Macrothesaurus was convened by the Information Systems Unit of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs in May 1984. This meeting was attended by representatives of the regional commissions and observers from libraries and other information units at Headquarters as well as from the Advisory Committee for the Co-ordination of Information Systems (ACCIS). The purpose of the meeting was to review the results of the project to finalize the English, French and Spanish versions of the draft third edition of the Macrothesaurus. The new edition of the UNBIS Thesaurus in three languages will be issued shortly and will be based on 14 thesauri as well as glossaries, terminologies and vocabularies, taking into account input from a number of agencies as well as from the Macrothesaurus. In parallel with these two maintenance operations, a merging of these two main tools used in the United Nations is in preparation and will hopefully be achieved in the next biennium giving the Organization a single indexing tool. The next two years will be used for the reconciliation of discrepancies, collection of opinions of users of both tools and preparation of the new merged thesaurus. Another co-operative operation at the level of the system is contemplated for the preparation of a common thesaurus in science and technology, under the lead of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.

6.   The Secretary-General agrees, however, that the JIU call for improving co-operative activities among libraries through the establishment of a new mechanism at the inter-agency level is well-stated and deserves careful examination by the organizations concerned, although the report does not address the organizational aspects of the recommended panel.

7.   The Secretary-General believes that in order to be effective such a panel should be integrated in the framework of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) and its subsidiary bodies. Such a procedure, however, would have financial implications for organizations and would only be justified if such a panel were to set a few specific and realistic goals that it hopes to achieve, along with a time frame for achieving each one. The Secretary-General believes that among the goals defined by the inspectors, priority should be given to an agreement to apply internationally adopted rules and standards for library operations (including a common indexing vocabulary) in order to facilitate developing common bibliographic control over United Nations system documentation.

 1 (b)   <u>Improved human resources planning, career development, recruitment and staffing standards, and training for library staff</u>.

8.   The inspectors characterized librarians as being a stagnant occupational group, without real career development opportunities. They also mentioned increasing sophistication of professional qualifications required in the light of rapid technological change in the library and information services field.

9.   The Secretary-General recognizes that increased co-operation between libraries calls for a meeting ground for different levels of librarians and believes that if such co-operation is organized it may have a positive effect in permitting exchange of information and thus enhance the knowledge and skills of the participants.

10. Concerning training librarians in the new technologies it should be noted that a special effort was made in 1984 by the Training and Examination Service at the request of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library to provide specialized training. Two courses in electronic data-processing applications to library activities have been organized. Both courses were offered four times throughout the year, reaching approximately 80 Professional staff members as well as some senior General Service staff. A course in the area of cataloguing and indexing was also organized and reached about 20 Professional staff. From the period of January 1981 to the present, 38 staff members from the Library have been granted external studies courses in the framework of the External Studies Programme. Specialized training on UNBIS operations was also organized by Dag Hammarskjöld Library staff at the Geneva Library, in order to facilitate co-operation between the two libraries.

11. More can certainly be done on the use of new technologies and common standards, particularly at duty stations other than New York and for small libraries. The possibility of organizing inter-agency meetings at the regional level, including a training component as well as a co-operative component, could be investigated. A comprehensive training package could be designed and offered at different meetings. It must be noted, however, that this also has financial implications for each duty station, which cannot be ignored.

12. In addition to training of existing staff the recruitment of fresh talent with proper experience should also be considered. The inspectors observe that the "trend toward increasingly complex library service requirements inevitably requires a further upgrading of qualifications for and levels of some key posts at the senior General Service and Professional levels". The Secretary-General favours that the matter should be further examined by the Classification Section. Perhaps the standards used to evaluate library posts should be reviewed as well.

1 (c) Inter-library co-operation at local duty stations.

13. The Secretary-General recognizes, as noted by the inspectors that, although in some regions co-operative library activities are already fairly well developed, in other regions there is much more that could be done. In addition to the example of ESCAP's co-operative activities cited in the report, ECLA's regional activities should also be cited. At the local duty stations where such co-operative activities are not initiated a good start might be an inter-agency meeting of librarians as mentioned in the previous paragraph, if resources are available. The ACCIS Newsletter could be used for the generalization and dissemination of local experiences as models.

1 (d) Microform programmes and joint use of other available and merging technologies.

14. The inspectors suggest that the proposed inter-library panel give serious consideration to in-house production of microforms using modern electronic means and to co-operative uses of microforms as well. The Secretary-General notes that an increased interest in microforms had been expressed during recent years by different types of libraries and for various reasons. Librarians of the United Nations system have storage problems and would appreciate having the collections in a more compact format. Some of the depository libraries and information centres would like to receive microforms of United Nations documents not only to save space but also to accelerate receipt of the documents, to build comprehensive collections of United Nations documents and to avoid the apparent extensive losses of documents in transit.

15. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library is currently reviewing the directive governing the reproduction of United Nations materials in microform and the microfiche copying service and is preparing a manual for preparing United Nations documents for microfiching. An inventory of the microfiche collection of United Nations documents is also under preparation. Starting in 1985, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library plans to input data on the availability of microforms into its machine-readable data base.

16. A study of the possibility of producing microfiche of United Nations documents from computer-based operations is being undertaken by the Technical Innovations Unit of the Department of Conference Services in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. A more extensive exchange between agencies on microform programmes and activities will certainly improve co-operation in this area.

1 (e)   Strengthening the effectiveness of depository library networks.

17.   The inspectors recommended that the proposed inter-library panel commission a
special joint study of depository libraries in order to assess how effectively the
network functions to meet user needs.   Problems such as coverage, acquisitions
policy procedures and the need for training were identified.   United Nations
Headquarters has administrative instructions on "principles governing United
Nations depository libraries", instructions for depository libraries receiving
United Nations material and a guide on the use of United Nations documents.   It
would be possible to have a common approach to these problems if it is felt useful
by the organizations.   However, it should be kept in mind that for most of the
problems encountered by depository libraries (e.g. the lack of space, lack of
trained personnel, lack of equipment such as microform readers and photocopiers and
the inability to make use of documents in United Nations official languages), there
is little that can be done by the libraries of the United Nations system.   The only
area where more can be done would be training.   An extensive programme of training
the staff of depository libraries all over the world would have very serious
financial implications.   It would, however, be possible for the panel to examine
the financial implications of developing in co-operation with JUNIC audio-visual
self-instructional training materials for use by depository libraries' staff.

1 (f)   Closer working relationships with public information centre libraries,
relevant UNESCO-supported programmes and international library
organizations.

18.   The Secretary-General believes that if an inter-library panel is organized it
should certainly have very close relations with the Joint United Nations
Information Committee in the areas of common interest and potential co-operation.

19.   Concerning participation in UNESCO-supported programmes, such as the UNISIST
Programme, Universal Bibliographic Control or the Universal Availability of
Publications, it should be recognized that the participation of United Nations
libraries was not very extensive, but this is due mostly to the scarce travel funds
allocated to libraries.   This is the same reason for which there has been little
participation by United Nations staff in meetings of international library
organizations.

Recommendation 2:   Management improvements

20.   The inspectors stated in their report that the systems approach to modern
library services requires basic changes in library management.   They mentioned the
need for an overall library structure that should be more efficient in serving
users.   They noted that the impact of new information and communications technology
should be taken into account in the dilemma of centralized versus decentralized
systems and that in particular the growing number of libraries and other
information, reference and documentation units requires serious measures to improve
inter-library co-operation within the United Nations system.   Internal management
of libraries was also of concern to the inspectors.

21.   In their recommendation 2 the inspectors propose that each organization should
take action to ensure that:

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2 (a)   Its network of libraries is an integrated and effective one that meets
        user needs without waste, fragmentation, delay and duplication, and
        that the central library provides necessary leadership, services and
        support to branch, regional and specialized library operations.

22.   The Secretary-General agrees with the need expressed by the inspectors to
better rationalize and integrate the library and information units in the United
Nations system. As mentioned by the inspectors, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in
New York has Headquarters' responsibility (under ST/SGB/152) to review and make
recommendations on proposals for the establishment of new collections and to
recommend measures for achieving efficient maintenance of these collections.

23.   In order to achieve better co-ordination at the level of the system it could
be envisaged that the proposed inter-library panel be given an advisory role on the
creation of new libraries or reference collections and on the links that these
libraries should have with the existing libraries and other information units. The
panel could also propose a training programme for the reference units.

24.   On the proposal to re-institute the newsletter which was published in the late
1970s for libraries participating in the ACC Working Party on Indexing of
Documents, it is suggested that in order not to increase the number of documents,
the possibility of adding a section on libraries or library co-operation in the
bi-monthly ACCIS Newsletter should be examined. This would also permit librarians
to share their experience and exchange ideas with other information systems.

2 (b)   The responsibilities and functions of its libraries are clearly
        established and developed within its overall information system, so
        that the libraries have well-defined relationships with other
        information units, systems and services.

25.   The Secretary-General agrees with the inspectors' recommendation. It should
be noted, however, that co-operation among libraries is time-consuming. For this
reason, it has to be efficacious and well-organized. In order to co-operate at a
maximum level of efficiency it is necessary to have a solid framework for a common
work programme and a clear understanding and definition of each institution's
role. Small units are often reluctant to co-operate with larger units since they
like their independence and are not sure that they will not lose it in the process
of co-operation. Only seriously planned decentralized operations can avert this
fear. The common use of new technologies is one way of establishing a real
dialogue between libraries.

2 (c)   Each library in the organization, no matter how small, establishes and
        maintains some basic form of internal management objectives, work-load
        and staffing standards and analysis, longer-term planning process, and
        regular communication with users. Each library should incorporate
        these elements in an annual or biennial internal work programme, with
        subsequent regular reporting to responsible higher-level officials on
        actions taken and results achieved.

26.   The Secretary-General recognizes the need for improving the internal
management of libraries in the system. It is, however, necessary to make a
distinction between libraries; some are only very small reference collections and

do not have individual work programmes. These depend totally on the group that
they support. The inspectors have mentioned that one third of United Nations
system libraries have no Professional staff members. The Secretary-General
believes that a careful analysis of the functions of these libraries and their
staff should be undertaken before making any recommendations.

27. The inspectors' recommendation on work programmes, reporting and follow-up was
already implemented by the Department of Conference Services for the preparation of
the 1984-1989 medium-term plan. Following the instructions received in
October 1983 from the Controller, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library prepared its
medium-term plan. The Library's medium-term plan contains a programme element on
"Standards in library computerized operations" because the introduction of new
technologies has made existing production standards obsolete. This programme
element will involve complex measurements and participation of other libraries of
the United Nations system. It is planned to achieve concrete results by 1986. The
Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA) has also incorporated its internal
management objectives in the biennial internal work programme for 1986-1987.

Recommendation 3: New technology

Each library, as a specific part of its staffing and organizational processes,
internal work programme, and co-operative actions with other libraries of the
system, should continually consider possibilities and actions needed to keep
pace with changing information and library technology requirements.

28. This recommendation, although the shortest in the inspectors' report, is the
one that may have the strongest impact on the libraries of the system, if carefully
implemented.

29. The inspectors found that the libraries of the United Nations system vary
considerably in their use of new technological developments. Only one third of the
78 libraries reviewed have computer-based indexes and catalogues. The inspectors
pointed out that new technology and systems will be closely intertwined with
co-operative activities and management improvements and will have an enormous
impact on the future operations of the United Nations system libraries. They also
noted that all of these changes will require a new kind of librarian able to
facilitate and adjust to constant technological changes.

30. Several areas were identified by the inspectors as good starting points for
introducing or for paying more attention to the introduction of new technologies.
The first is a need for a larger microform programme. This point was dealt with in
paragraphs 14, 15 and 16. The second area is an increased use of computers for
bibliographic control and to facilitate co-operative indexing of materials produced
by the system. They also mentioned areas such as control over materials borrowed
by users, on-line connections with the data bases of the organizations as well as
connections with international or commercial data bases.

31. It was also felt by the inspectors that teletransmission of texts could
encourage co-operative acquisition of materials and speed up inter-library loan
services.

32. The Secretary-General agrees that the impact of the new technologies on libraries becomes much stronger when introduced on a co-operative basis, because these technologies become more and more cost-effective as their scale of application increases. This means, however, an important attempt must be undertaken to reconcile the existing efforts. In many cases in the United Nations system as well as at the national level, technologies were imposed on librarians by computer specialists because the librarians were not properly trained to express their needs and those of their users. Libraries have often suffered from trying to adapt software designed for other purposes and have met with varying success in meeting library needs. This situation will need to be corrected over a period of time.

33. In order to implement a coherent computerization programme, libraries must be provided with the necessary equipment and the necessary programming and maintenance support. This means acquiring terminals, obtaining appropriate processing and storage facilities and having technical support. This also means preparation of detailed objectives and implementation programme. In a period of austerity when libraries have to give priority to the acquisition of books and serials whose prices are increasing dramatically, this recommendation may be difficult to implement.

34. Despite all of these problems some projects were started and some encouraging results have been achieved during the last year. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library has implemented a network based on its UNBIS system and is helping the Geneva Library with the computerization of its services. In spite of the difficulties encountered with the lack of equipment, the Geneva Library is entering bibliographic records into the UNBIS data base in New York. The ESCAP Library and the Dag Hammarskjöld Library are exchanging tapes on an experimental basis in order to examine how to avoid duplication in processing documents. Discussions are being conducted among various units at Headquarters in order to consolidate the network. The Information Systems Unit of DIESA, as mentioned previously, is examining merging the tapes on unpublished literature from regional commissions with its own data base. Achieving compatibility among United Nations data bases will permit a better use of each other's resources. At its eleventh session ECWA adopted a resolution on the development of an information system that would conform to the inspectors' comments on new technology. In this resolution the Executive Secretary is requested to co-operate with Arab, regional and international organizations for the purpose of co-ordinating the information programme ensuring complementarity and preventing duplication.

35. Regarding the general use of information provided by the libraries, the inspectors noted that although more than 250 bibliographic systems, referral centres, clearing-houses, information analysis centres and data banks are identified in the 1980 IOB Directory of Information Systems (and nearly twice that number will be described in the forthcoming ACCIS directory), together they produce only 16 data bases that are available to users through on-line services and are connected to one or more international communications networks. In January 1984, there were some 2,000 data bases around the world available on-line, but less than 1 per cent is produced by United Nations organizations. In a recent study by UNESCO under the Universal Availability of Publications programme on the use of United Nations system documentation in Member States, one of the main conclusions was that the users would welcome a service giving direct access to the data banks of United Nations system documents.

36.   The Secretary-General recognizes that, in principle, United Nations data bases
should be offered to the widest possible user market. Although few United Nations
data bases are offered on-line to users, United Nations system information is
increasingly being stored and maintained on data bases. In order to provide policy
guidance in this rapidly evolving sector of information services, an informal group
met several times at the request of the Working Committee of the Publications
Board. ACCIS has established a Technical Panel on Access to United Nations Data
Bases which will review current trends in the field and propose policy guidelines
governing the dissemination of United Nations information in machine-readable
formats. It is hoped that these two groups will be able to provide the foundation
for the necessary decisions that will have to be made on how to answer the growing
number of requests from missions, governmental agencies and libraries all over the
world for on-line access to the data bases produced by the United Nations.

37.   It has to be noted that two reports related to this subject were prepared by
the United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations "Transnational corporations
and transborder data flows: a technical paper" and "Transborder data flows:
access to the international on-line data base market: a technical paper". They
can serve as a basis for discussions on the subject.

Recommendation 4:   United Nations library services in Geneva

The Secretary-General should ensure that the new Chief Librarian of the United
Nations Library at Geneva will take prompt action to (a) review, streamline
and modernize library operations and (b) provide responsive library services
that effectively support the needs and substantive programmes of all users in
Geneva. The Secretary-General should also carefully examine existing budget
review and control procedures to ensure that Geneva library service proposals
are properly presented to governing bodies in the future, and that similar
problems do not exist in other parts of the budget.

38.   In examining some of the individual libraries during their study, the
inspectors noted that in one particular area, namely the United Nations library
services in Geneva, co-operative activities have disintegrated. An interesting
attempt was made from 1976 to 1982 to merge and co-ordinate reference and technical
library services of the Geneva Library, the United Nations Conference on Trade and
Development and the Economic Commission for Europe, but final results are
disappointing. Criticism was also made about the lack of programmes to computerize
library services and on the informal way posts were lent or transferred from one
organization to the other.

39.   The Secretary-General agrees that most of the problems mentioned in the JIU
report do exist to varying degrees: the collaboration between the Geneva Library
and the Economic Reference Service has become weaker and weaker and the Library
still does not meet all the standards that a modern library should. Perhaps
because the Library is more than half a century old and because of its unique
nature and wide and diversified functions, its modernization was late in starting
and continued at a slow pace. However, the process of computerized cataloguing of
books and United Nations documents has undergone tests and is being gradually
introduced using the UNBIS System through the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in New York.

40. The Secretary-General recognizes that, in the present information age, it is essential for internal productivity as well as for efficient, modern and responsive services that a library be equipped with the most modern technology. This cannot be done overnight; it requires a careful assessment of needs, planning of objectives, budget and human resources and thorough training of the staff. Co-ordination and harmonization both within the Library and its staff and with those it is designed to serve is also a requisite.

41. Every effort is being made to make the best use of both human and technical resources in order to address the problems outlined in the JIU report and to propose measures to improve services to the Organization and co-operation with other libraries of the United Nations system, particularly those located in Geneva, notwithstanding the unique nature of the Library, which has certain obligations to serve the general research community, as postulated by the Rockfeller Foundation endowment. Experience in improving information activities already gained by other major libraries in the system should be shared with the Geneva Library in various ways, particularly within the framework of the inter-library panel, should the General Assembly decide to establish this organ. A new approach should also contribute to easing tensions, which have been an obstacle to efficiency and development, and to establishing careful and efficient co-ordination within the internal management as well as in the selection and training of staff.

42. The JIU report has contributed to identifying some of the problems which have beset the UNOG Library, although the difficulties have been multi-faceted and not always easily perceived. The Inspectors might wish to undertake further studies to look into two important questions for the Library: space requirements and staffing and grading of the UNOG Library personnel.