

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Records and archives management in the United Nations**

**JIU/REP/2013/2**

The current United Nations policies and procedures and the related organizational arrangements in place do not allow for effective records and archives management (RAM) either at Headquarters or in the field. The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) looked into this issue not only in terms of preserving institutional memory, but also from the perspective of efficiency of working processes, accountability and transparency of business transactions, decision-making processes and risk management. The primary audience of the present report goes beyond professional information management officers as the report contains recommendations that should help to raise the awareness of decision makers, line managers and staff engaged in substantive activities on the importance of effective RAM as an essential component of good governance, a prerequisite for efficient administrative processes, a basis for enhanced knowledge management and a source of benefit across various areas and at many levels of the United Nations entities.

#### **Regulatory frameworks require consolidation**

The report highlights the urgent need to update and consolidate the respective regulatory frameworks governing RAM in the United Nations entities. Those frameworks should be recast into a comprehensive and unequivocal set of principles, rules and practice-oriented procedures covering the whole life cycle of a document (recommendation 1). This prerequisite would ensure that these principles are strictly applied throughout the entities based on tailored RAM programmes (recommendation 2) that need to be sustained by sufficient training for each category of stakeholders (staff at large, managers and RAM focal points) and monitored effectively (recommendation 3).

One of the main challenges is ensuring that the policy and procedures in place allow for all records (paper-based, digital and those based on other technologies) to be processed in accordance with the same principles, despite the obvious differences in their formats and features. It is well understood that the tools necessary to capture, manage and store them are quite different, but in order to ensure corporate consistency in their use, all records should be subject to the same processing principles. This has been achieved by some international organizations because of a strong commitment on the part of both their senior management and Member States.

#### **Practices for both physical paper and digital records need to be improved significantly**

At present, RAM arrangements in the United Nations are characterized by fragmented approaches and the inconsistent implementation of policy principles. The current challenges in terms of the capture, processing and preservation of physical paper-based records as archives mean that it is not clear whether or not records of substantive, administrative, legal or historical value are captured and transferred to a corporate repository to adequately preserve them, or whether they are simply lost.

The absence of dynamic management of digital records and the lack of application of RAM principles to such records (unless they are printed) expose the entities concerned to major risks in terms of integrity, security and authenticity both at present and in the future when those records will have to be processed and assessed in line with RAM and may represent the only basis for meaningful archives. Therefore, significant improvement is indispensable in the deployment of electronic document and records management systems (EDRMS) to ensure dynamic management

of those records (recommendation 4). In order to build the future archives of the United Nations entities, the question of digital preservation is a key issue for immediate consideration.

### **The status quo is no longer an option**

The United Nations entities need to make significant progress to ensure effective functioning of RAM programmes, both at their headquarters and in field offices. This requires a long-term corporate commitment at the highest level of each entity, from both Member States and senior management. Properly reviewing and consolidating RAM principles and procedures, adapting them to the digital world and ensuring that they are embraced at all levels will also require an initial investment to build on internal capacity and to equip the United Nations entities with appropriate tools, notably in the digital environment. In the opinion of the Inspector, this investment is worthwhile given the potential medium-term benefits, e.g., enhancement of substantive work, efficiency gains and savings in personnel.

To that end, the Inspector recommends undertaking a coherent project to establish the appropriate conditions for the implementation of a RAM programme at the corporate level of each entity (recommendation 6). The principles of such a project should include the following key dimensions:

- Approval of Member States, convinced by a solid cost-benefit analysis of the direct and/or medium-term and long-term benefits of the project, including in terms of easy retrieval of related records, which would enhance administrative efficiency, organizational effectiveness and financial savings.
- Commitment from senior management to foster a culture of compliance among all managers and staff who will be the first to benefit from such improvement.
- Project governance at an appropriate level to provide overall vision, responsibility and authority on the various components of information management and to ensure a multidisciplinary approach (RAM, knowledge management and ICT) to mobilize different sets of expertise in a synergistic way.
- Entity-wide coverage at headquarters and field offices to ensure meaningful and timely dialogue on RAM requirements.

Bearing in mind the provisions of the High Level Committee on Management (HLCM) Strategic Plan 2013–2016, which, in paragraph 13, favours joint projects taking into consideration the means and constraints of each entity, the Inspector also encourages the United Nations system organizations and entities to merge their efforts and resources on a voluntary basis to ensure a common approach to RAM matters, particularly in regards to the key issue of digital preservation of records (recommendation 5).

### **Recommendation 1:**

**The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should review their respective regulatory frameworks governing RAM and recast them into a comprehensive and unequivocal set of principles, practice-oriented procedures and rules to keep pace with changes in the record-keeping environment and technology, and cover the whole life cycle of recorded information. They should ensure strict compliance with those principles, procedures and rules for any materials identified as records of the organization or entity.**

### **Recommendation 2:**

**The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report, as well as their senior managers, should be accountable for ensuring that all departments, offices and other entities under their responsibility have developed and apply the basic components of records management programmes to all records for which they have managerial responsibility.**

**Recommendation 3:**

**The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should ensure that appropriate time and resources are allocated to institutionalizing tailored RAM training programmes delivered by experienced RAM experts, both at headquarters and in the field, to (a) senior and middle-level managers; (b) records coordinators and other staff involved in RAM activities; and (c) staff at large.**

**Recommendation 4:**

**The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should ensure that information systems that capture, create or manage e-records meet international standards for record-keeping and the preservation of digital records and archives.**

**Recommendation 5:**

**The Secretary-General, in his capacity as a Chair of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should create an inter-organizational task force chaired by an experienced RAM expert, bringing together those entities most interested in developing a common approach to the preservation of long-term and/or permanent digital records (strategy, policy and infrastructure).**

**Recommendation 6:**

**The General Assembly and the governing bodies of the United Nations entities covered by this report should request the Secretary-General and the respective executive heads to present a corporate or joint project proposal to enhance RAM in a consistent way within their respective entities.**