Common services in Geneva

Report by the Secretariat

1. At the twelfth meeting of the Administration, Budget and finance Committee in January 2000, some members pointed out that the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on common services in Geneva dealt with an important matter, namely, whether WHO and other Geneva-based organizations of the United Nations system were making full use of the administrative and support services available locally.\(^1\) It was thus recommended that the Director-General should be requested to submit a short report on the subject.

2. Some examples of existing common services used by WHO in Geneva are the Joint Medical Service, administered by WHO on behalf of the United Nations system in Geneva, and the International Computing Centre, which has grown over nearly 30 years to serve 29 organizations today, compared to only three initially. Both were subject to detailed scrutiny in Part II of the JIU report on the United Nations system common services in Geneva, which contains four specific case studies.\(^2\) It is proposed to discuss those two services in conjunction with the Secretariat’s report on the JIU reports issued during the year 2000, to be submitted to the Audit Committee at its fifth meeting in January 2002.

3. However, there are many forms in which the Organization takes advantage of common services, not all of them being full-scale “joint ventures” of a semi-autonomous nature such as the two above examples. Apart from the Inter-Agency Procurement Services Office, which is based in Copenhagen, there is also the Joint Purchase Service, which benefits from a legal instrument dating back to the early 1950s formalizing cooperation among the Geneva-based organizations. This service was also covered in Part II of the above-mentioned JIU report.

4. For some specific services, WHO uses the facilities of sister agencies or vice versa, which is also a form of “common services”. Examples include the sessions of Health Assembly, which use the building and conference facilities of the United Nations at Geneva, or conversely, the host agreement with UNAIDS, under which WHO provides the administration of UNAIDS on a fee basis.

5. Efforts are currently under way, together with the United Nations Office at Geneva, to set up a joint committee of Geneva-based organizations which, on a case-by-case basis, would review the feasibility of harmonizing and pooling requirements or specifications before tendering specific services such as cleaning, gardening, catering, certain types of insurances, or travel.

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\(^1\) Document JIU/REP/98/4.

\(^2\) Document JIU/REP/2000/5
6. Sometimes, an intermediate level of pooling may be appropriate, as in the case of arrangements between ILO, WHO, and the United Nations Office at Geneva for joint development of a new computer system for health insurance data processing and analysis. This system is now in operation, with certain adaptations in each body depending on its specific needs.

7. A long-established interagency consultation process exists regarding document processing and reproduction services, which is not, however, synonymous with a common print facility. The latter was in fact suggested by JIU in Part I of its common services report, but this is not necessarily the most cost-effective solution. To exceed a certain critical size by pooling of print jobs can well be counterproductive, since inefficiencies arise in the form of greater complexity, conflicting priorities, differing quality requirements, technical standards, etc., all of which are likely to compromise the operational objectives.

8. The above examples indicate not only that an existing broad range of common-service type arrangements are being used by WHO, but also that supplanting formerly agency-specific services by common services is not always a panacea. Each case should be analysed in its own right, and, depending on partners’ specific needs and the underlying economic fundamentals, a customized solution should be adopted.

9. The ultimate objective for the solution adopted is always the quest for more cost-effective delivery of a given service at a specified level of quality and delivery time.